魔法科高校の劣等生 4

九校戦編〈下〉

The irregular
at magic high school

佐島勤
Tsutomu Sato

illustration／石田可奈
Kana Ishida

電撃文庫

魔法科高校の劣等生

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九校戦編〈下〉

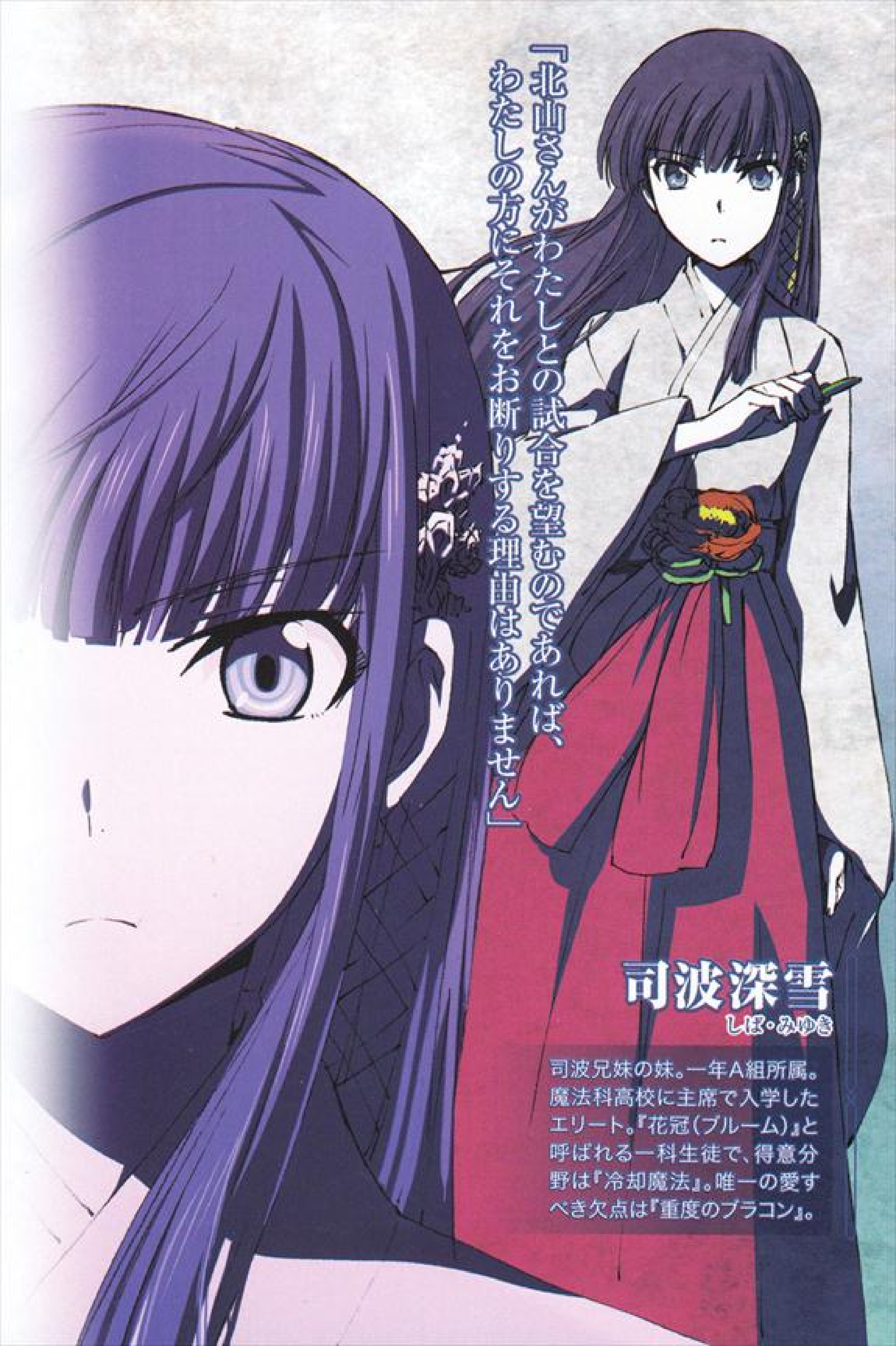
4

SILVER HORN
TRIDENT

佐島勤
Tsutomu Sato

illustration／石田可奈
Kana Ishida

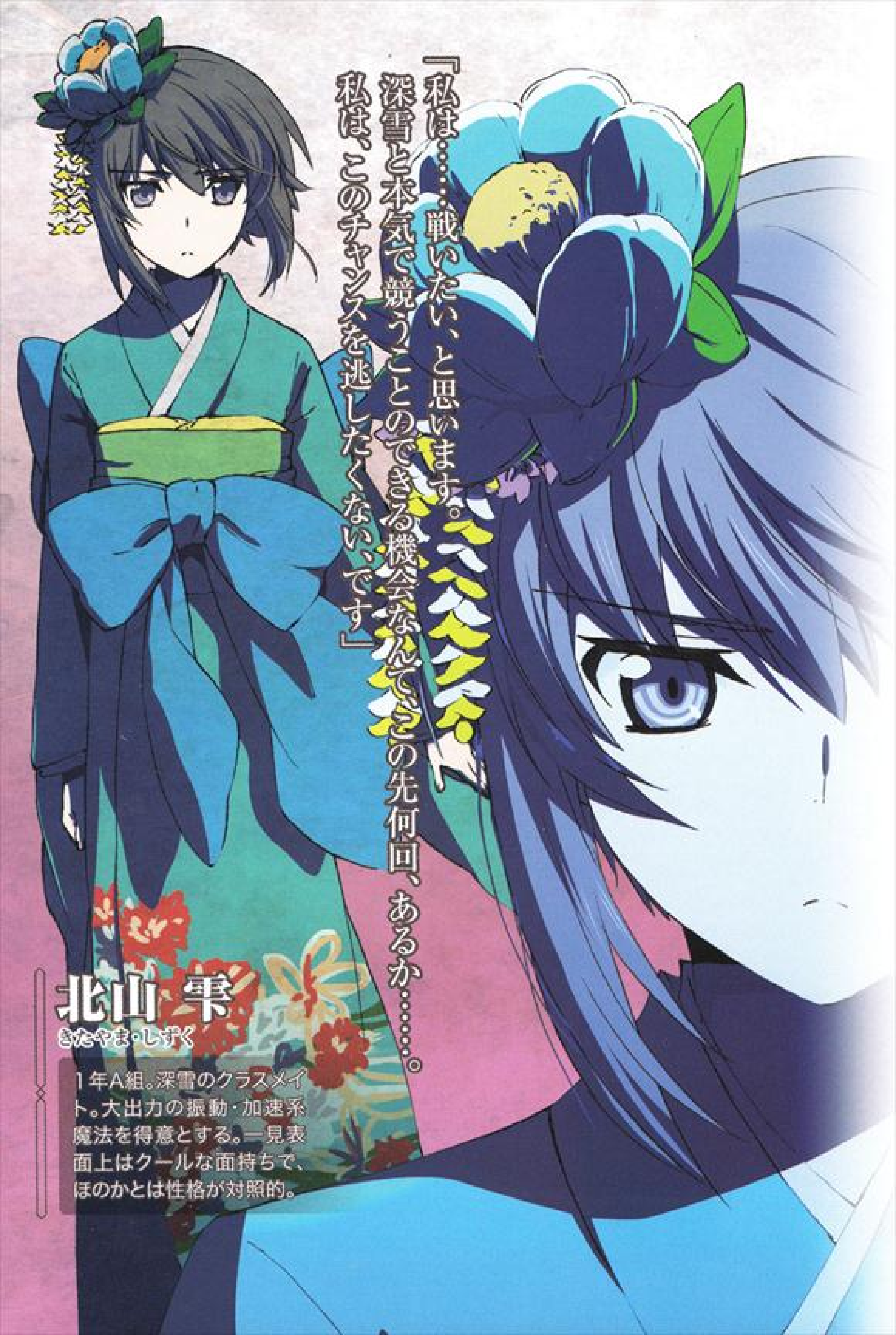
illustrator assistant／ジミー・ストーン、末永康子
design／BEE-PEE



「北山さんがわたしとの試合を望むのであれば、
わたしの方にそれをお断りする理由はありません」

司波深雪
しば・みゆき

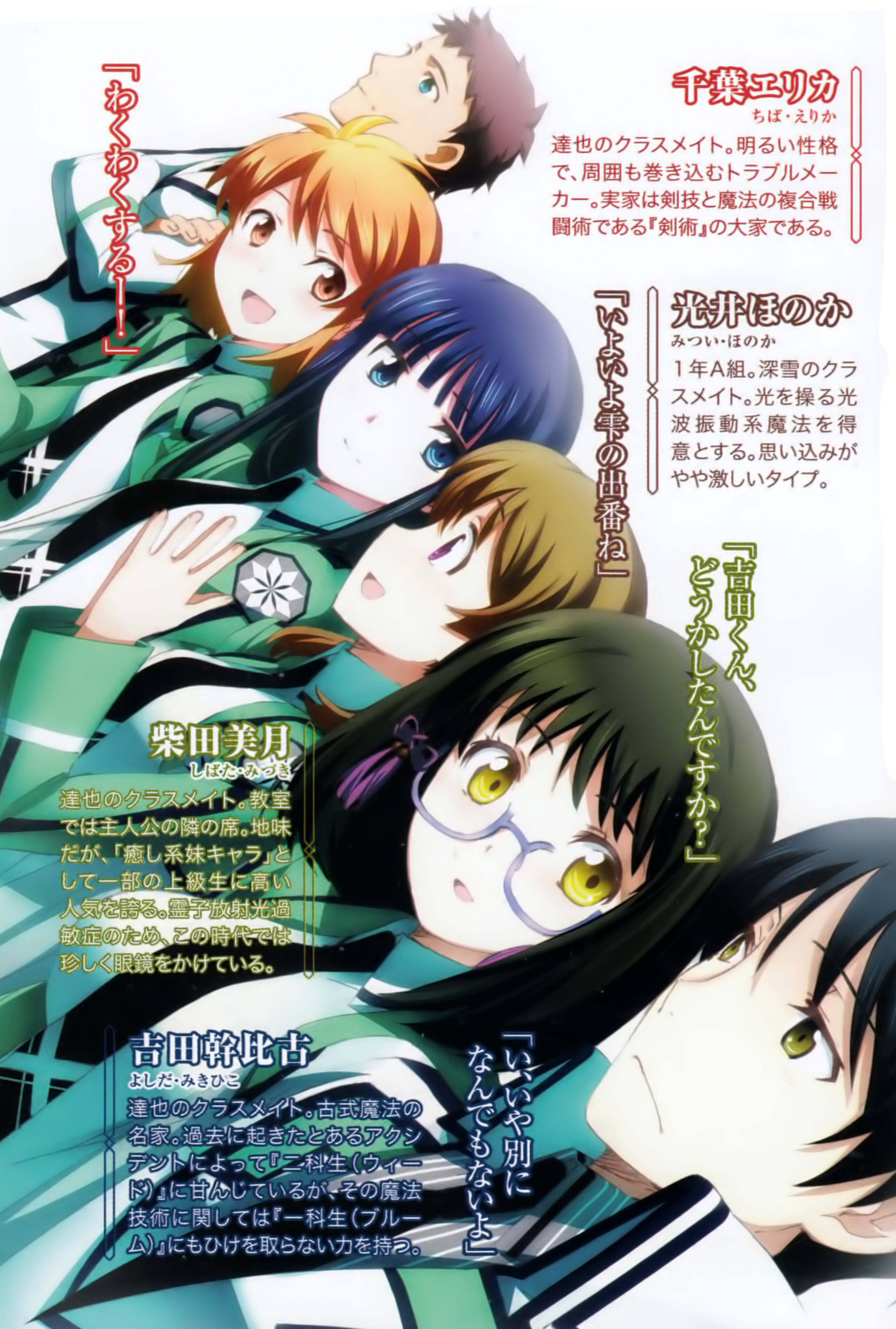
司波兄妹の妹。一年A組所属。魔法科高校に主席で入学したエリート。『花冠（ブルーム）』と呼ばれる一科生徒で、得意分野は『冷却魔法』。唯一の愛すべき欠点は『重度のブラコン』。



『私は……戦いたい、と思います。
深雪と本気で競うことのできる機会なんて、この先何回、あるか……。
私は、このチャンスを逃したくない、です』

北山　雫
きたやま・しずく

1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。大出力の振動・加速系魔法を得意とする。一見表面上はクールな面持ちで、ほのかとは性格が対照的。


「わくわくする――！」
「いよいよ雫の出番ね」
「吉田くん、どうかしたんですか？」
「い、いや別になんでもないよ」

千葉エリカ
ちば・えりか

達也のクラスメイト。明るい性格で、周囲も巻き込むトラブルメーカー。実家は剣技と魔法の複合戦闘術である『剣術』の大家である。

光井ほのか
みつい・ほのか

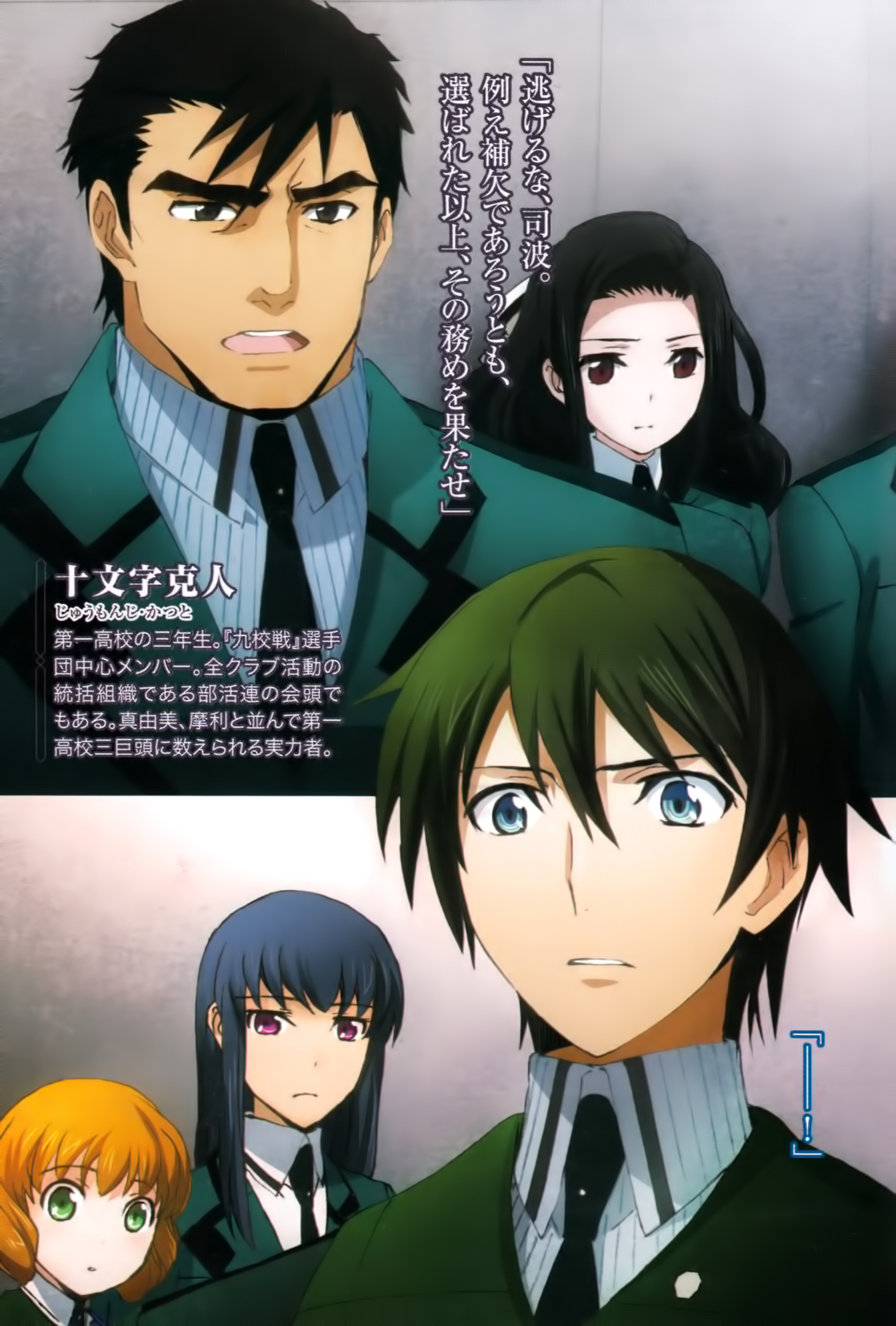
１年Ａ組。深雪のクラスメイト。光を操る光波振動系魔法を得意とする。思い込みがやや激しいタイプ。

柴田美月
しばた・みづき

達也のクラスメイト。教室では主人公の隣の席。地味だが、「癒し系妹キャラ」として一部の上級生に高い人気を誇る。霊子放射光過敏症のため、この時代では珍しく眼鏡をかけている。

吉田幹比古
よしだ・みきひこ

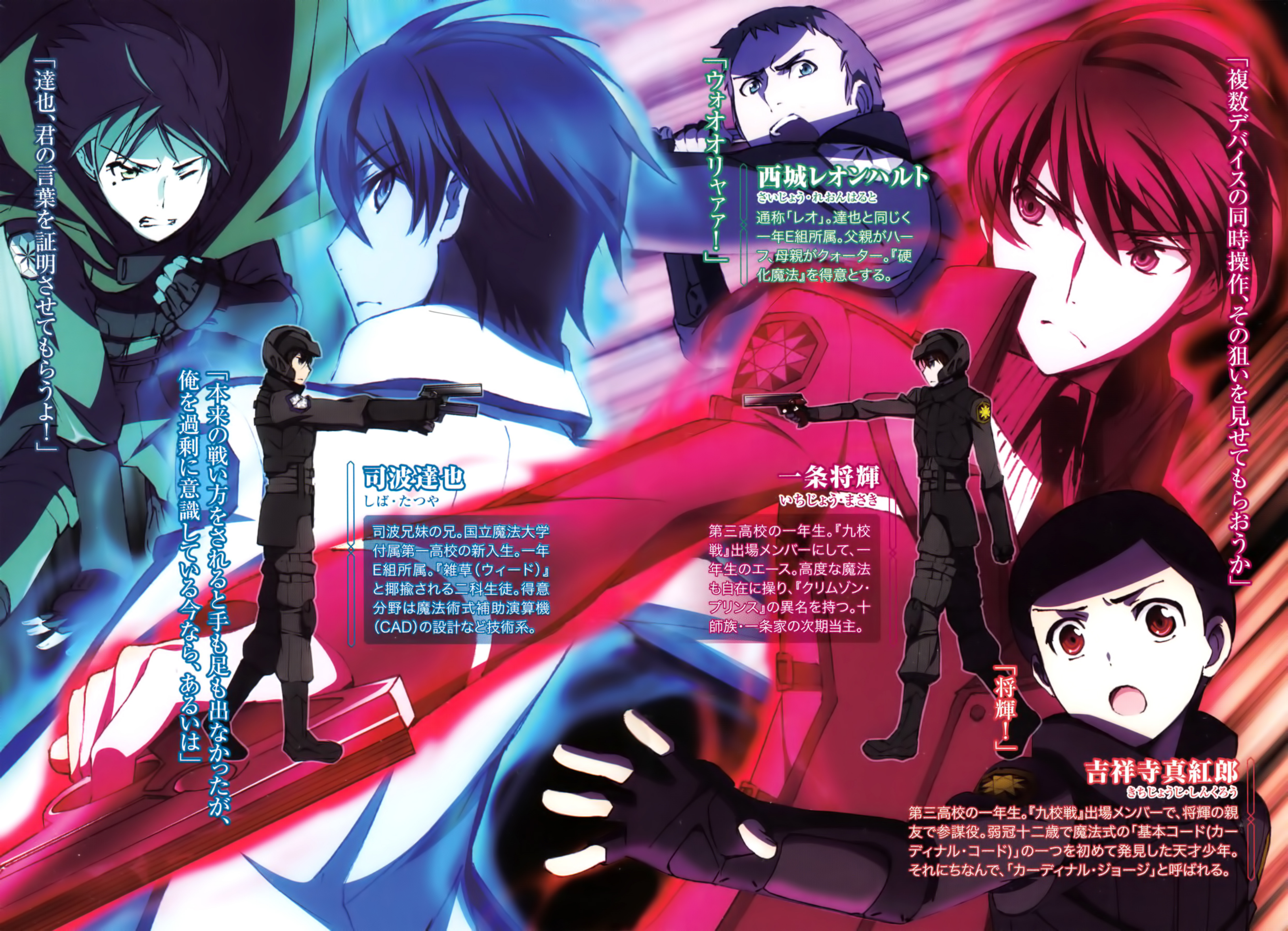
達也のクラスメイト。古式魔法の名家。過去に起きたとあるアクシデントによって『二科生（ウィード）』に甘んじているが、その魔法技術に関しては『一科生（ブルーム）』にもひけを取らない力を持つ。


「逃げるな、司波。例え補欠であろうとも、選ばれた以上、その務めを果たせ」
「――！」

十文字克人

じゅうもんじ・かつと

第一高校の三年生。『九校戦』選手団中心メンバー。全クラブ活動の統括組織である部活連の会頭でもある。真由美、摩利と並んで第一高校三巨頭に数えられる実力者。



「複数デバイスの同時操作、その狙いを見せてもらおうか」
「将輝！」
「ウォオオリャアア！」
「本来の戦い方をされると手も足も出なかったが、俺を過剰に意識している今なら、あるいは」
「達也、君の言葉を証明させてもらうよ！」

西城レオンハルト
さいじょう・れおんはると

通称「レオ」。達也と同じく一年E組所属。父親がハーフ、母親がクォーター。『硬化魔法』を得意とする。

一条将輝
いちじょう・まさき

第三高校の一年生。『九校戦』出場メンバーにして、一年生のエース。高度な魔法も自在に操り、『クリムゾン・プリンス』の異名を持つ。十師族・一条家の次期当主。

吉祥寺真紅郎
きちじょうじ・しんくろう

第三高校の一年生。『九校戦』出場メンバーで、将輝の親友で参謀役。弱冠十二歳で魔法式の「基本コード(カーディナル・コード)」の一つを初めて発見した天才少年。それにちなんで、「カーディナル・ジョージ」と呼ばれる。

司波達也
しば・たつや

司波兄妹の兄。国立魔法大学付属第一高校の新入生。一年E組所属。『雑草（ウィード）』と揶揄される二科生徒。得意分野は魔法術式補助演算機(CAD)の設計など技術系。

様々な現代魔法

●氷炎地獄〔インフェルノ〕

対象とするエリアを二分し一方の空間内にある全ての物質の振動エネルギー、運動エネルギーを減速、その余剰エネルギーをもう一方のエリアへ逃がし加熱することでエネルギー収支の辻褄を合わせる熱エントロピーの逆転魔法。隣接するエリアに灼熱と厳寒を同時発生させる。

●ニブルヘイム

振動減速系広域魔法。領域内の物質を比熱、相(フェーズ)に関わらず均質に冷却する。応用として、ダイヤモンドダスト(細氷)、ドライアイス粒子、そして時に液体窒素の霧すらも含む大規模冷気塊を作り出し攻撃対象にぶつけるという使用法もある。

●ドライ・ブリザード

空気中の二酸化炭素を集め、ドライアイスの粒子を作り出し、凍結過程で余った熱エネルギーを運動エネルギーに変換してドライアイス粒子を高速で飛ばす魔法。

●這い寄る雷蛇〔スリザリン・サンダース〕

ドライアイスの礫を発生させる「ドライ・ブリザード」によりドライアイス気化によって水蒸気を凝結させ、気化した二酸化炭素を溶け込ませた導電性の高い霧を発生させた上で振動系魔法と放出系魔法により摩擦電気を発生させ炭酸ガスが溶け込んだ霧や水滴を導線として敵に電撃を浴びせるコンビネーション魔法。

●爆裂

対象物内部の液体を気化させる発散系魔法。生物ならば体液が気化して身体が破裂、内燃機関動力の機械ならば燃料が気化して爆散。燃料電池でも結果は同じ。可燃性の燃料を搭載していなくてもバッテリー液や油圧液や冷却液や潤滑液など、およそ液体を搭載していない機械は存在しないから『爆裂』が発動すればほぼあらゆる機械が破壊され停止する。

●飛行魔法

重力制御により空中を移動する魔法。長らく実行は不可能とされてきたが、持続時間をごく短時間（デフォルトで0.5秒）に設定した魔法を連続発動するスキームにより、飛行状態変更の都度より強力な干渉力が要求される障碍をクリア。術者の魔法力が続く限り飛行し続けることが可能となった。

●雲散霧消〔ミスト・ディスパージョン〕

物質の構造情報に干渉することにより、物質を元素レベルの分子またはイオンに分解する魔法。構造情報に対する直接干渉は最高難度の魔法に属する。

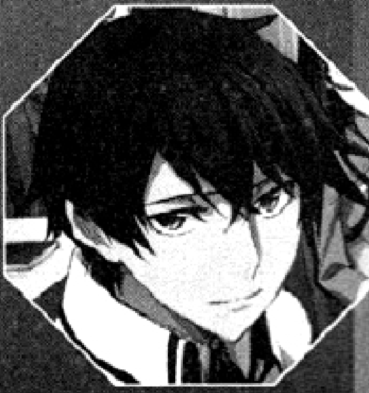
●術式解散〔グラム・ディスパージョン〕

魔法の本体である魔法式を、意味の有る構造を持たないサイオン粒子群に分解する魔法。魔法式は事象に付随する情報体に作用するという性質上、その情報構造が露出していなければならず、魔法式そのものに対する干渉を防ぐ手立ては無い。その反面、魔法式を分解する為にはその構造を認識できなければならず、コンマ数秒で発動を完了する現代魔法で魔法の発動前に魔法式を解析するには「視る」だけで魔法式の構造を認識できる特殊な情報処理能力が必要。あらかじめ使用される魔法が分かっている実験ならともかく、実用化は不可能と一般に考えられている。

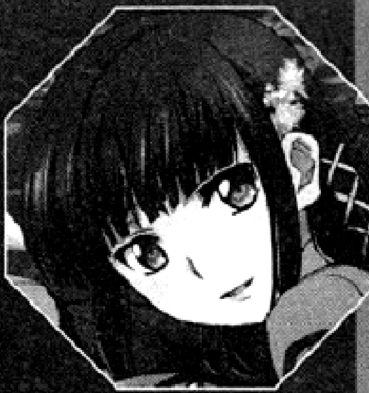
●術式解体〔グラム・デモリッション〕

圧縮したサイオン粒子の塊をイデアを経由せずに対象物へ直接ぶつけて爆発させ、そこに付け加えられた起動式や魔法式などの、魔法を記録したサイオン情報体を吹き飛ばしてしまう無系統魔法。魔法と言っても、事象改変の為の魔法式としての構造を持たないサイオンの砲弾であるため情報強化や領域干渉には影響されない。また、砲弾自体の持つ圧力がキャスト・ジャミングの影響もはね返してしまう。物理的な作用が皆無である故に、どんな障碍物でも防ぐことはできない。

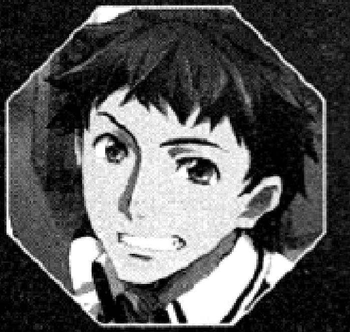
Character
キャラクター紹介



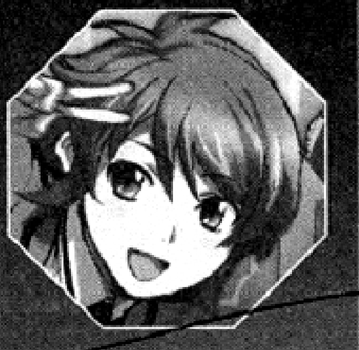
司波達也
しば・たつや
1年E組。『雑草』と
揶揄される二科生(劣等生)。
全てに達観している。



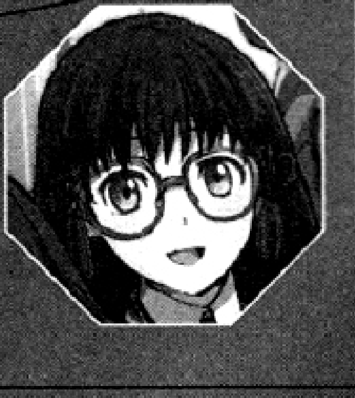
司波深雪
しば・みゆき
1年A組。達也の妹。
主席入学した優等生。
冷却魔法が得意。兄を溺愛する。



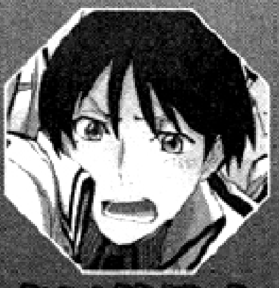
西城レオンハルト
さいじょう・れおんはると
1年E組。達也のクラスメイト。
硬化魔法が得意。明るい性格。



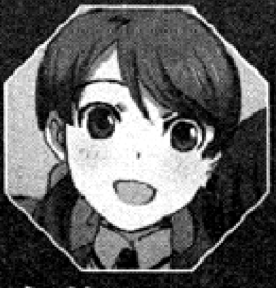
千葉エリカ
ちば・えりか
1年E組。達也のクラスメイト。
剣術が得意。チャーミングな
トラブルメーカー。



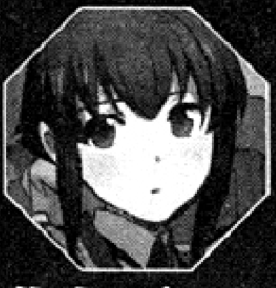
柴田美月
しばた・みづき
1年E組。達也のクラスメイト。
霊子放射光過敏症。
少し天然が入った真面目な少女。



吉田幹比古
よしだ・みきひこ
1年E組。達也のクラスメイト。
古式魔法の名家。エリカとは
幼少時からの顔見知り。



光井ほのか
みつい・ほのか
1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。
光波振動系魔法が得意。
思い込むとやや直情的。

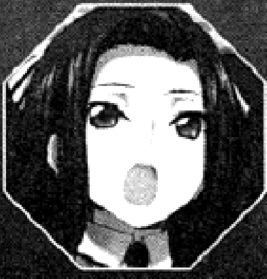


北山 雫
きたやま・しずく
1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。
振動・加速系魔法が得意。
感情の起伏をあまり表に出さない。

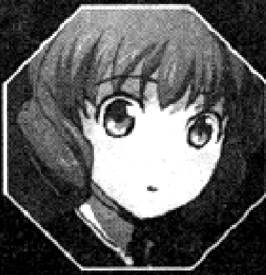
里美スバル
さとみ・すばる
1年D組。美少年と見まごう少女。
明るくノリの良い性格。

森崎 駿
もりさき・しゅん
1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。
CAD早撃ちが得意。
一科生としてのプライドが高い。

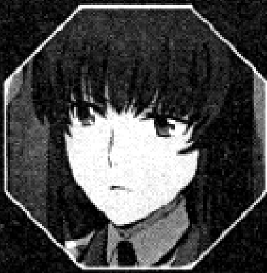
明智英美
あけち・えいみ
1年B組。クォーターで、フルネームは
アメリア＝英美＝明智＝ゴールディ。



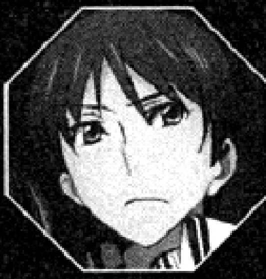
七草真由美
さえぐさ・まゆみ
三年生。生徒会会長。
魔法科生徒の中でも
その能力は歴代最高クラス。



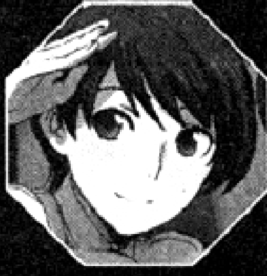
中条あずさ
なかじょう・あずさ
二年生。生徒会書記。
オドオドした性格で
引っ込み思案。



市原鈴音
いちはら・すずね
三年生。生徒会会計。
冷静沈着な頭脳派。
真由美の右腕。



服部刑部少丞範蔵
はっとり・ぎょうぶしょうじょう・はんぞう
二年生。生徒会副会長。
生真面目で優秀。

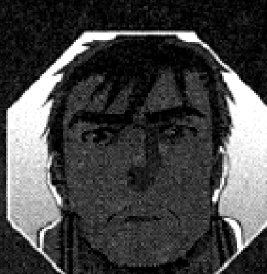


渡辺摩利
わたなべ・まり
三年生。風紀委員会委員長。
真由美の親友で、
物事全般にやや好戦的。

辰巳鋼太郎
たつみ・こうたろう
三年生。風紀委員。
豪快な性格の持ち主。

沢木 碧
さわき・みどり
二年生。風紀委員。
女性的な名前がコンプレックス。

五十里 啓
いそり・けい
二年生。魔法理論の成績は
学年トップ。千代田花音とは
許嫁同士。



十文字克人
じゅうもんじ・かつと
三年生。全クラブ活動の
統括組織である
部活連の会頭。

千代田花音
ちよだ・かのん
二年生。活発な印象の少女。
五十里啓とは許嫁同士。

風間玄信
かざま・はるのぶ
陸軍101旅団・独立魔装大隊・隊長。
階級は少佐。

真田繁留
さなだ・しげる
陸軍101旅団・独立魔装大隊・幹部。
階級は大尉。

柳 連
やなぎ・むらじ
陸軍101旅団・独立魔装大隊・幹部。
階級は大尉。

山中幸典
やまなか・こうすけ
陸軍101旅団・独立魔装大隊・幹部。
軍医少佐。一級の治癒魔法師。

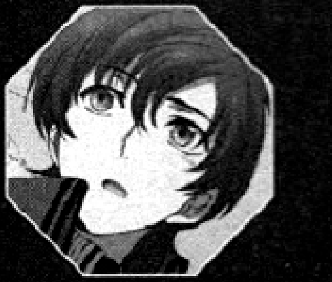
藤林響子
ふじばやし・きょうこ
風間の副官を務める女性士官。
階級は少尉。

桐原武明
きりはら・たけあき
二年生。剣術部所属。
関東剣術大会中等部のチャンピオン。

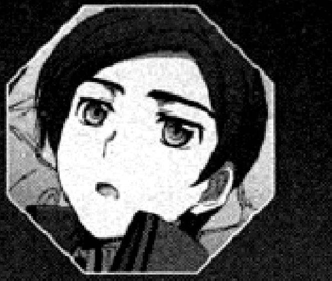
壬生紗耶香
みぶ・さやか
二年生。剣道部所属。
中等部剣道大会女子部の全国二位。

九重八雲
ここのえ・やくも
古式魔法「忍術」の使い手。
達也の体術の師匠。

小野 遥
おの・はるか
1年E組の総合カウンセラー。
いじられ気質だが、裏の顔も持つ。



一条将輝
いちじょう・まさき
第三高校の一年生。
九校戦に出場。
十師族・一条家の次期当主。



吉祥寺真紅郎
きちじょうじ・しんくろう
第三高校の一年生。九校戦に出場。
「カーディナル・ジョージ」の
異名で知られている。

九島 烈
くどう・れつ
世界最強の魔法師の一人と目されていた人物。
敬意を以て「老師」と呼ばれる。

Glossary

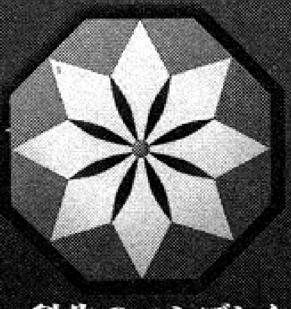
用語解説

魔法科高校

国立魔法大学付属高校の通称。全国に九校設置されている。この内、第一から第三までが一学年定員二百名で一科・二科制度を採っている。

ブルーム、ウィード

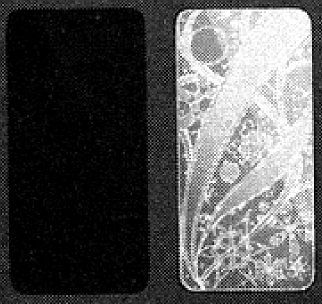
第一高校における一科生、二科生の格差を表す隠語。一科生の制服の左胸には八枚花弁のエンブレムが刺繍されているが、二科生の制服にはこれが無い。



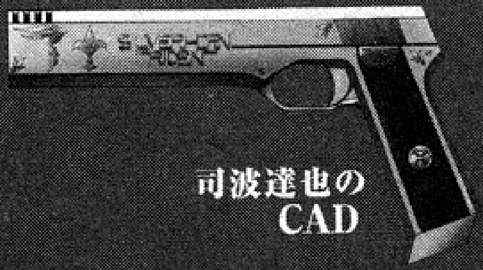
一科生のエンブレム

CAD〔シー・エー・ディー〕

魔法発動を簡略化させるデバイス。内部には魔法のプログラムが記録されている。特化型、汎用型などタイプ・形状は様々。



司波深雪のCAD



司波達也のCAD

フォア・リーブス・テクノロジー〔FLT〕

国内ＣＡＤメーカーの一つ。元々完成品よりも魔法工学部品で有名だったが、シルバー・モデルの開発により一躍ＣＡＤメーカーとしての知名度が増した。

トーラス・シルバー

僅か一年の間に特化型ＣＡＤのソフトウェアを十年は進歩させたと称えられる天才技術者。

エイドス〔個別情報体〕

元々はギリシア哲学用語。現代魔法学においてエイドスとは、事象に付随する情報体のことで、「世界」にその「事象」が存在することの記録で、「事象」が「世界」に記す足跡とも言える。現代魔法学における「魔法」の定義は、エイドスを改変することによって、その本体である「事象」を改変する技術とされている。

イデア〔情報体次元〕

元々はギリシア哲学用語。現代魔法学においてイデアとは、エイドスが記録されるプラットフォームのこと。魔法の一次的形態は、このイデアというプラットフォームに魔法式を出力して、そこに記録されているエイドスを書き換える技術である。

起動式

魔法の設計図であり、魔法を構築するためのプログラム。ＣＡＤには起動式のデータが圧縮保存されており、魔法師から流し込まれたサイオン波を展開したデータに従って信号化し、魔法師に返す。

サイオン（想子）

心霊現象の次元に属する非物質粒子で、認識や思考結果を記録する情報素子のこと。現代魔法の理論的基盤であるエイドス、現代魔法の根幹を支える技術である起動式や魔法式はサイオンで構築された情報体である。

プシオン（霊子）

心霊現象の次元に属する非物質粒子で、その存在は確認されているがその正体、その機能については未だ解明されていない。一般的な魔法師は、活性化したプシオンを「感じる」ことができるにとどまる。

九校戦

正式名称『全国魔法科高校親善魔法競技大会』。
その名の通り、第一高校～第九高校までの魔法科高校生たちが全国から集い、
熾烈な魔法勝負を繰り広げる団体競技である。

種目は、『スピード・シューティング』、『クラウド・ボール』、『バトル・ボード』、『アイス・ピラーズ・ブレイク』、『ミラージ・バット』、『モノリス・コード』の六つ。
※『モノリス・コード』は男子のみ、『ミラージ・バット』は女子のみの競技。

各校から一つの競技にエントリーできる人数は三名で、一人の選手が出場できる競技は二種目までと決められている。

大会の開催期間は十日間で、一年生のみが出場する競技『新人戦』も設けられている（本戦は学年制限無し）。『新人戦』は四日目から八日目にかけて行われる。

九校戦の勝敗／順位は各競技のポイントの合計で決まる。一位が五十ポイント、二位が三十ポイント、三位が二十ポイントという配分である。スピード・シューティング、バトル・ボード、ミラージ・バットは四位が十ポイント、クラウド・ボールとアイス・ピラーズ・ブレイクは四位から六位までの順位が決まらないので三回戦敗退三チームに各五ポイントが与えられる。九校戦の花形競技、モノリス・コードは一位チームに百ポイント、二位チームに六十ポイント、三位チームに四十ポイントが与えられ、ポイント上で最も比重の大きな競技になっている（『新人戦』のポイントは二分の一にして総合順位点に加算される）。

日　程	分　類	種　目
一日目 8月 3日(水)	本　戦 (全学年参加)	『スピード・シューティング』男女予選～決勝トーナメント 『バトル・ボード』男女予選
二日目 8月 4日(木)	本　戦 (全学年参加)	『クラウド・ボール』男女予選～決勝 『アイス・ピラーズ・ブレイク』男女予選
三日目 8月 5日(金)	本　戦 (全学年参加)	『バトル・ボード』男女準決勝～決勝 『アイス・ピラーズ・ブレイク』男女予選～決勝リーグ
四日目 8月 6日(土)	新人戦 (一年生のみ)	『スピード・シューティング』男女予選～決勝 『バトル・ボード』男女予選
五日目 8月 7日(日)	新人戦 (一年生のみ)	『クラウド・ボール』男女予選～決勝 『アイス・ピラーズ・ブレイク』男女予選
六日目 8月 8日(月)	新人戦 (一年生のみ)	『バトル・ボード』男女準決勝～決勝 『アイス・ピラーズ・ブレイク』男女予選～決勝リーグ
七日目 8月 9日(火)	新人戦 (一年生のみ)	『ミラージ・バット』女子予選～決勝 『モノリス・コード』男子予選リーグ
八日目 8月10日(水)	新人戦 (一年生のみ)	『モノリス・コード』男子決勝トーナメント
九日目 8月11日(木)	本　戦 (全学年参加)	『ミラージ・バット』女子予選～決勝 『モノリス・コード』男子予選リーグ
十日目 8月12日(金)	本　戦 (全学年参加)	『モノリス・コード』男子決勝トーナメント

Speed Shooting

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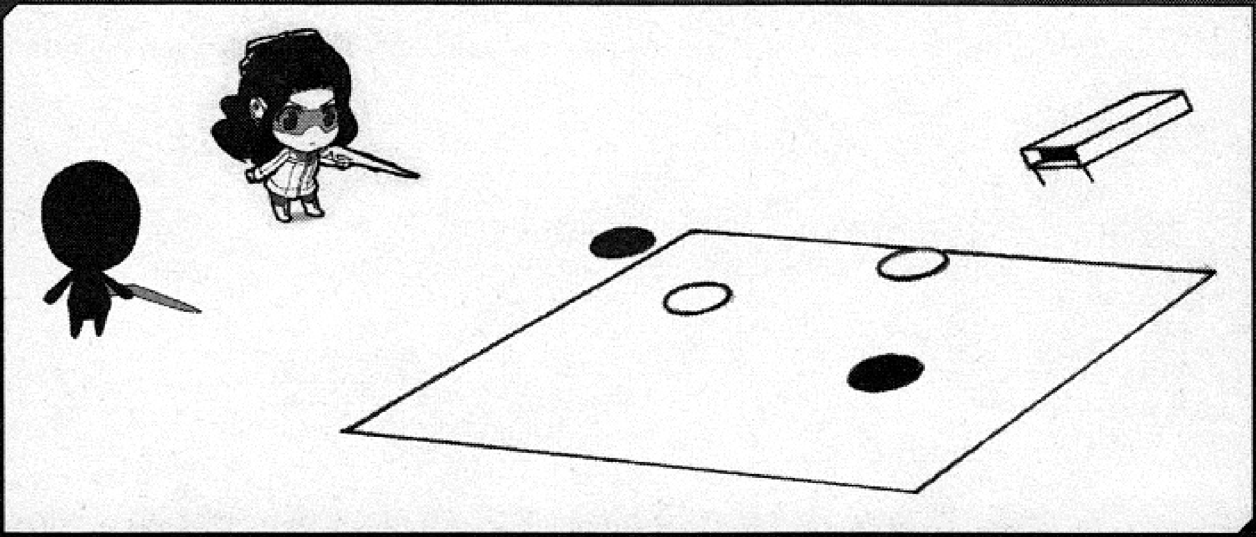

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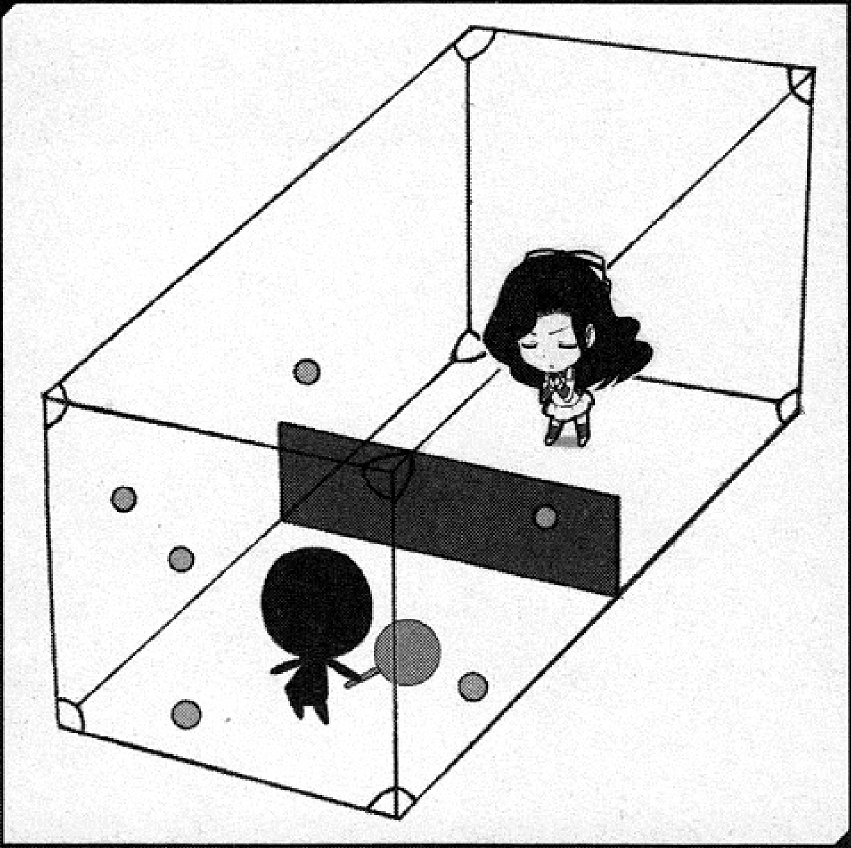

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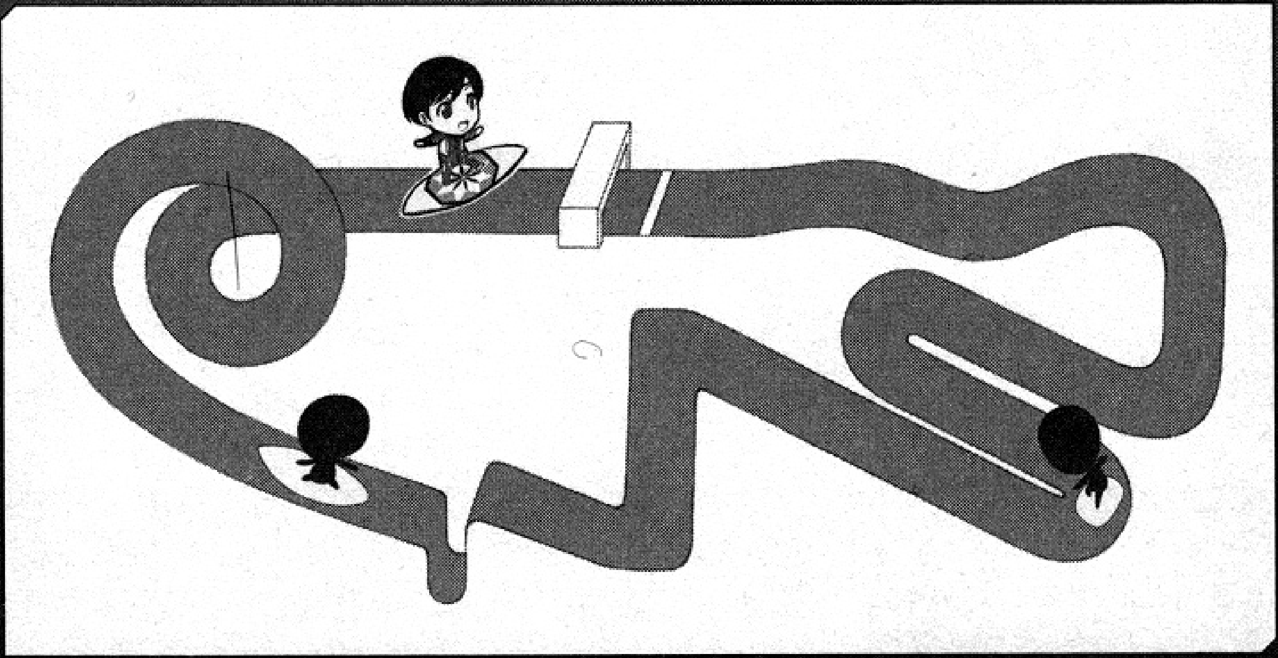

Ice Pillars Break

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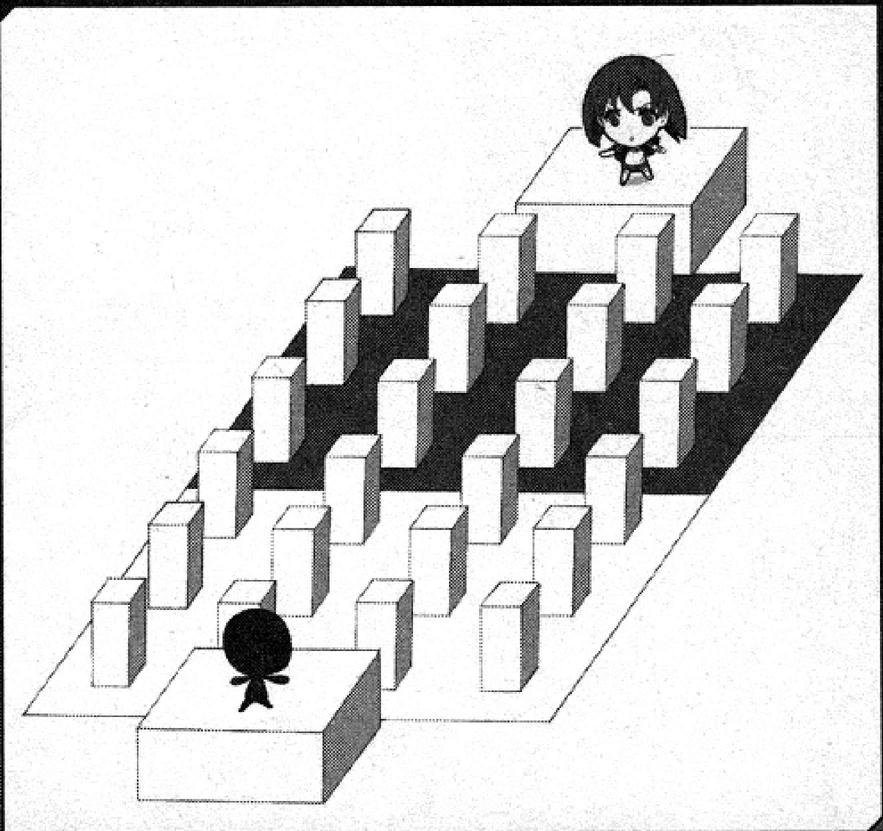
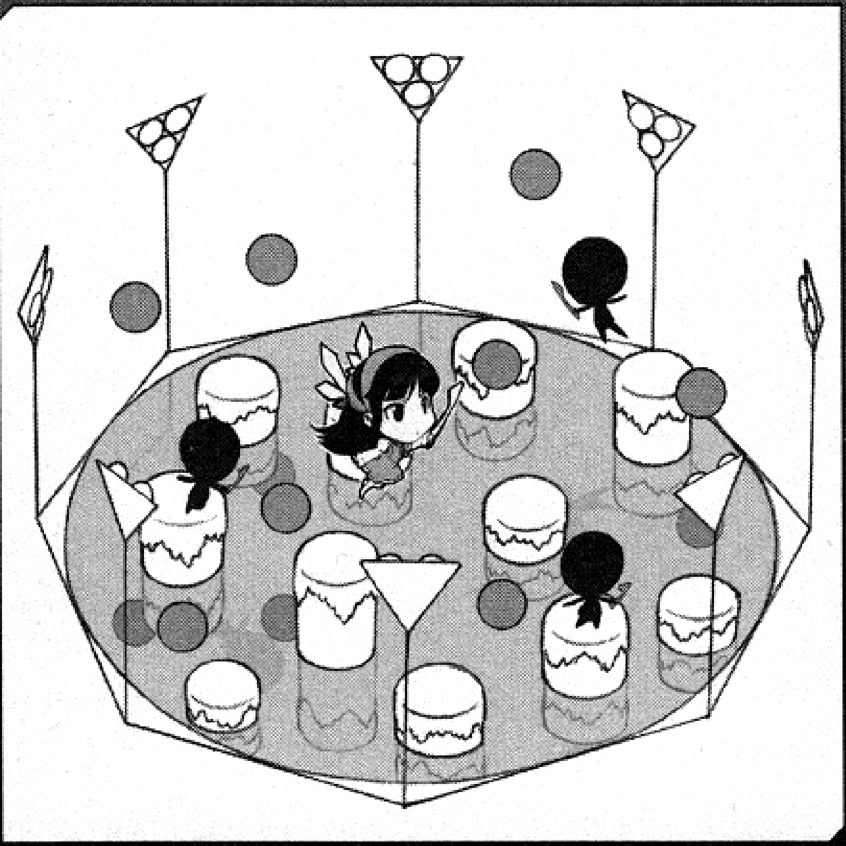
Players compete to destroy the opponent's pillars before their own are broken.
There is no need to use the body, since Players compete remotely with magic, so Players may wear whatever they wish, with the only restriction being that [It Must Not Offend Public Order or Morals].
It is said the Women's Pillars Break had become a Fashion Show in recent years.



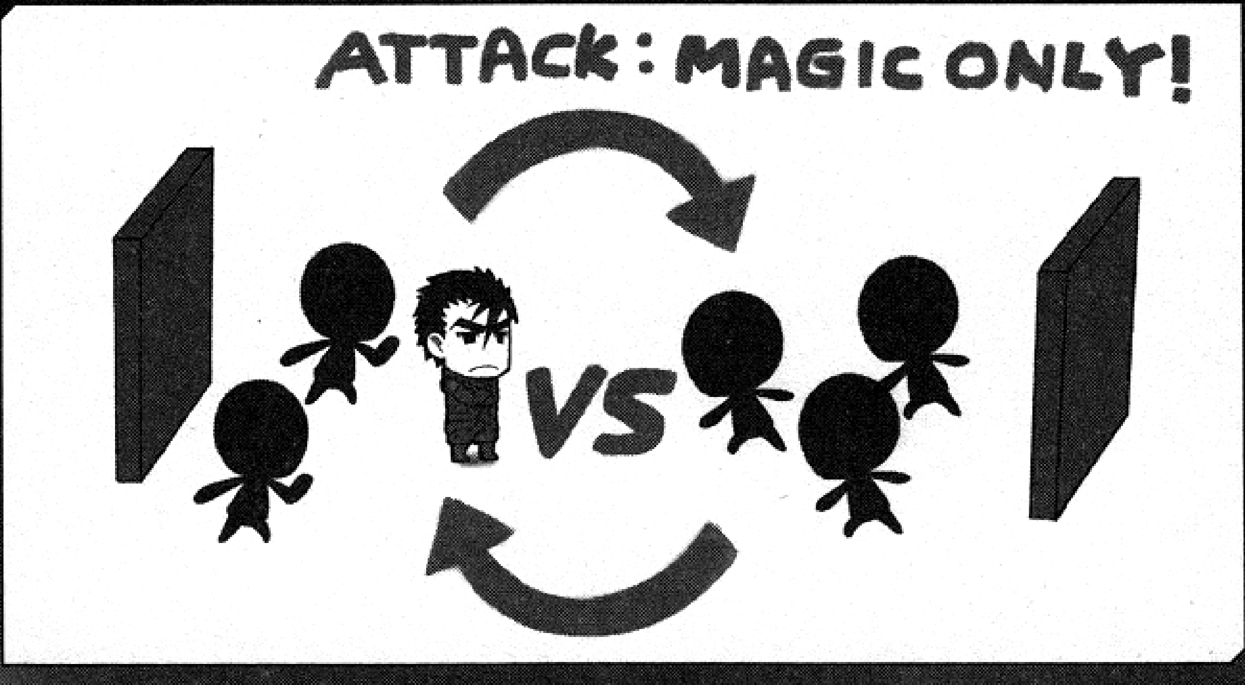
Mirage Bat

Amongst Players, this game is called [Mirage].
It is a women's only game. A holographic sphere is projected in the air, and Players must compete by using magic to rise into the air and hitting the orbs with their sticks.
Though this competition has the fewest number of games of all in the Nine-Schools Competition, the play time is typically the longest.
During the game, Players must continuously invoke magic to leap into the air.
It is said the burden is similar to running a full marathon.
The Nine-Schools Competition Mirage Bat is an event held only amongst women.
With their elaborate costumes and how they fly around, they are often likened to fairies.



Monolith Code

Amongst Players, this game is called [Monolith]. It is a men's only game. At the competition site, called a [Stage], magic is used to fight over the [Monolith], with each team having three players. The outcome is determined by splitting the monolith in the enemy encampment and transmitting a concealed code. Any attacks other than magic are forbidden. Breaking the monolith requires that it be struck with a special Non-Systemic Magic. Due to the nature of the event, this game is the most popular amongst the Nine-Schools Competition.



Modern Magic

様々な現代魔法

●氷炎地獄〔インフェルノ〕

対象とするエリアを二分し一方の空間内にある全ての物質の振動エネルギー、運動エネルギーを減速、その余剰エネルギーをもう一方のエリアへ逃がし加熱することでエネルギー収支の辻褄を合わせる熱エントロピーの逆転魔法。隣接するエリアに灼熱と厳寒を同時発生させる。

●ニブルヘイム

振動減速系広域魔法。領域内の物質を比熱、相(フェーズ)に関わらず均質に冷却する。応用として、ダイヤモンドダスト(細氷)、ドライアイス粒子、そして時に液体窒素の霧すらも含む大規模冷気塊を作り出し攻撃対象にぶつけるという使用法もある。

●ドライ・ブリザード

空気中の二酸化炭素を集め、ドライアイスの粒子を作り出し、凍結過程で余った熱エネルギーを運動エネルギーに変換してドライアイス粒子を高速で飛ばす魔法。

●這い寄る雷蛇〔スリザリン・サンダース〕

ドライアイスの礫を発生させる「ドライ・ブリザード」によりドライアイス気化によって水蒸気を凝結させ、気化した二酸化炭素を溶け込ませた導電性の高い霧を発生させた上で振動系魔法と放出系魔法により摩擦電気を発生させ炭酸ガスが溶け込んだ霧や水滴を導線として敵に電撃を浴びせるコンビネーション魔法。

●爆裂

対象物内部の液体を気化させる発散系魔法。生物ならば体液が気化して身体が破裂、内燃機関動力の機械ならば燃料が気化して爆散。燃料電池でも結果は同じ。可燃性の燃料を搭載していなくてもバッテリー液や油圧液や冷却液や潤滑液など、およそ液体を搭載していない機械は存在しないから『爆裂』が発動すればほぼあらゆる機械が破壊され停止する。

●飛行魔法

重力制御により空中を移動する魔法。長らく実行は不可能とされてきたが、持続時間をごく短時間〔デフォルトで0.5秒〕に設定した魔法を連続発動するスキームにより、飛行状態変更の都度より強力な干渉力が要求される障碍をクリア。術者の魔法力が続く限り飛行し続けることが可能となった。

●雲散霧消〔ミスト・ディスパージョン〕

物質の構造情報に干渉することにより、物質を元素レベルの分子またはイオンに分解する魔法。構造情報に対する直接干渉は最高難度の魔法に属する。

●術式解散〔グラム・ディスパージョン〕

魔法の本体である魔法式を、意味の有る構造を持たないサイオン粒子群に分解する魔法。魔法式は事象に付随する情報体に作用するという性質上、その情報構造が露出していなければならず、魔法式そのものに対する干渉を防ぐ手立ては無い。その反面、魔法式を分解する為にはその構造を認識できなければならず、コンマ数秒で発動を完了する現代魔法で魔法の発動前に魔法式を解析するには「視る」だけで魔法式の構造を認識できる特殊な情報処理能力が必要。あらかじめ使用される魔法が分かっている実験ならともかく、実用化は不可能と一般に考えられている。

●術式解体〔グラム・デモリッション〕

圧縮したサイオン粒子の塊をイデアを経由せずに対象物へ直接ぶつけて爆発させ、そこに付け加えられた起動式や魔法式などの、魔法を記録したサイオン情報体を吹き飛ばしてしまう無系統魔法。魔法と言っても、事象改変の為の魔法式としての構造を持たないサイオンの砲弾であるため情報強化や領域干渉には影響されない。また、砲弾自体の持つ圧力がキャスト・ジャミングの影響もはね返してしまう。物理的な作用が皆無である故に、どんな障碍物でも防ぐことはできない。

Hell of Fire and Water (Inferno)A magic which reverses the heat energy within a set area. Areas of bitter cold and scorching heat occur concurrently in adjacent regions.

NiflheimA Wide Area Deceleration-Attribute Oscillation-System Magic. The specific heat of the material within the area, regardless of attribute (Phase) is cooled evenly. As a result, a large mass of cold air which contains a fog of liquid nitrogen, Diamond Dust (Ice Needles), and dry ice particles is formed.

Dry BlizzardA magic which collects the carbon dioxide in the air to produce particles of dry ice. The dry ice flies at high speed by converting the thermal energy produced by the freezing process into kinetic energy.

Thunder Snake Path (Slithering Thunders)Like [Dry Blizzard], stones of dry ice are produced and water vapor is condensed. This combination magic utilizes Oscillation-System and Dispersion-System Magic to melt the ice, creating a fog of carbon dioxide which has a high electrical conductivity through which a static charge is run through.

RuptureA Dissipation-System magic which evaporates all liquid within an object. In the case of living organisms, body fluids will evaporate and the body will explode. All fuel will vaporize in internal combustion engines or fuel cells. Since nearly all machines have a fluid of some kind, such as lubricants, coolants, hydraulic fluids, oils, or battery fluids, they will instantly be destroyed by [Explosion] or simply stop working.

Flight MagicA magic to move through the air via gravity control. It was once thought to be impossible, using a very short duration (a default of 0.5 seconds) of magic invoked in rapid succession, the difficulty caused by an increasing Interference Strength was cleared. It is possible to continue flying so long as the operator's Magic Power is in supply.

Vanishing Clouds, Fog Dispersal (Mist Dispersion)By interfering with the structural information, this magic decomposes substances into molecules such as ions and the basic elements. Direct interference into the structural information of an object is a form of magic of the highest difficulty.

Magic Dissolution (Gram Dispersion)This magic takes a Magic Ritual and decomposes it into a group of Psion particles without a meaningful structure. Due to the nature of a Magic Ritual acting on the information of an object accompanying a phenomenon, if the information has not been exposed, it is impossible to interfere with the magic. On the other hand, if the Magic Ritual is decomposed, the phenomenon will not occur. To analyze the magic before the magic is activated in the present age where invocation takes a fraction of a second requires the ability to [See] and analyze the magic structure. Since the user is typically required to understand the magic being used beforehand, it is thought utilization of this magic is impossible.

Magic Dismantling (Gram Demolition)A mass of compressed Psion particles are thrown directly at an object and explode. Any Activation Sequence or Magic Ritual recorded into the Psion Information Body is blown away. Though it is called magic, it is simply a cannonball of Psions that has neither structure nor a Magic Ritual to modify an event, so it is not affected by Zone Interference. Furthermore, the pressure of the cannonball also repels the effects of Cast Jamming. It has no physical effects and cannot be hindered by any obstacle.

Nine-Schools Competition

Official Name: [Nationwide Magic High School Athletics Competition]. As its name suggests, students from First to Ninth High School gather from all around the country. It is a team competition with fierce magic games.

Unique events include [Speed Shooting], [Crowd Ball], [Battle Board],[Ice Pillars Break], [Mirage Bat], [Monolith Code], six in total. ※[Monolith Code] is men's only, [Mirage Bat] is women's only.

The number of people participating in each event is three per school, and each player can participate in two events. The competition is held over a period of ten days. There is also a set of games in which only freshman play in, the [Rookie Division] (the Official Division has no grade restriction). The [Rookie Games] will be held from the fourth to the eighth day. Victory or defeat of the school is determined by the total points. First Place receives fifty points, Second Place receives thirty points, and Third Place receives twenty points. Speed Shooting, Battle Board, and Mirage Bat award ten points to Fourth Place. Accel Ball and Ice Pillars Break reward five points for each victory of any team who makes it to the third round. The primary game of the Nine-Schools Competition, Monolith Code, grants one-hundred points for First Place, sixty points for Second Place, and forty points for Third Place due to it being a team game, thus giving it the most weight (The Rookie Games are worth half the points and are added to the overall ranking).

Day - Date - Division

1 - 8/3 (Wed) - Official

- [Speed Shooting] Men's/Women's Preliminaries ~ Finals Tournament
- [Battle Board] Men's/Women's Preliminaries

2 - 8/4 (Thu) - Official

- [Crowd Ball] Men's/Women's Preliminaries ~ Finals
- [Ice Pillars Break] Men's/Women's Preliminaries

3 - 8/5 (Fri) - Official

- [Battle Board] Men's/Women's Semi-finals ~ Finals
- [Ice Pillars Break] Men's/Women's Preliminaries ~ Finals League

4 - 8/6 (Sat) - Newcomer

- [Speed Shooting] Men's/Women's Preliminaries ~ Finals
- [Battle Board] Men's/Women's Preliminaries

5 - 8/7 (Sun) - Newcomer

- [Crowd Ball] Men's/Women's Preliminaries ~ Finals
- [Ice Pillars Break] Men's/Women's Preliminaries

6 - 8/8 (Mon) - Newcomer

- [Battle Board] Men's/Women's Semi-finals ~ Finals
- [Ice Pillars Break] Men's/Women's Preliminaries ~ Finals League

7 - 8/9 (Tue) - Newcomer

- [Mirage Bat] Women's Preliminaries ~ Finals
- [Monolith Code] Men's Preliminaries League

8 - 8/10 (Wed) - Newcomer

- [Monolith Code] Men's Finals Tournament

9 - 8/11 (Thu) - Official

[Mirage Bat] Women's Preliminaries ~ Finals

[Monolith Code] Men's Preliminaries League

10 - 8/12 (Fri) - Official

[Monolith Code] Men's Finals Tournament

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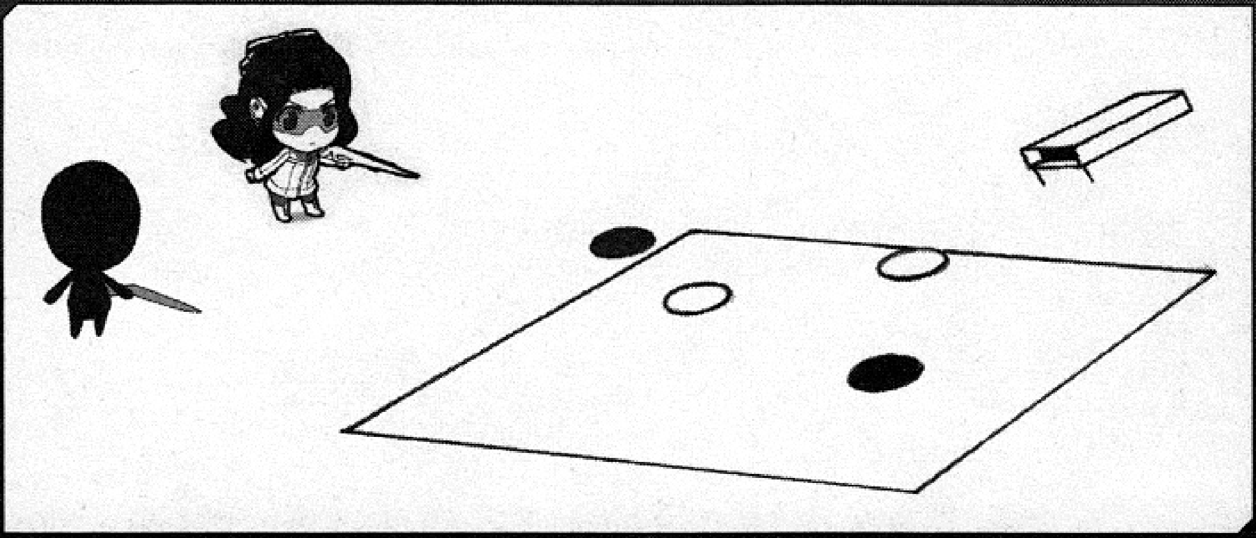

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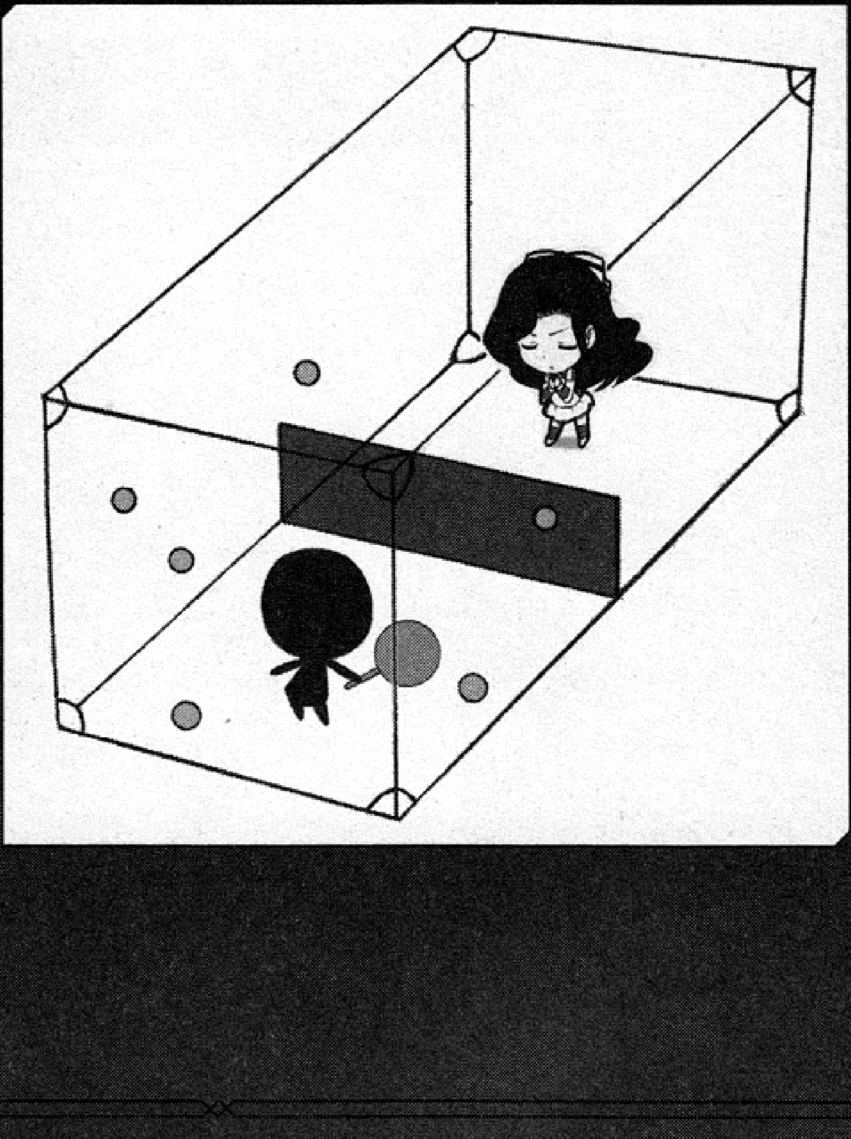

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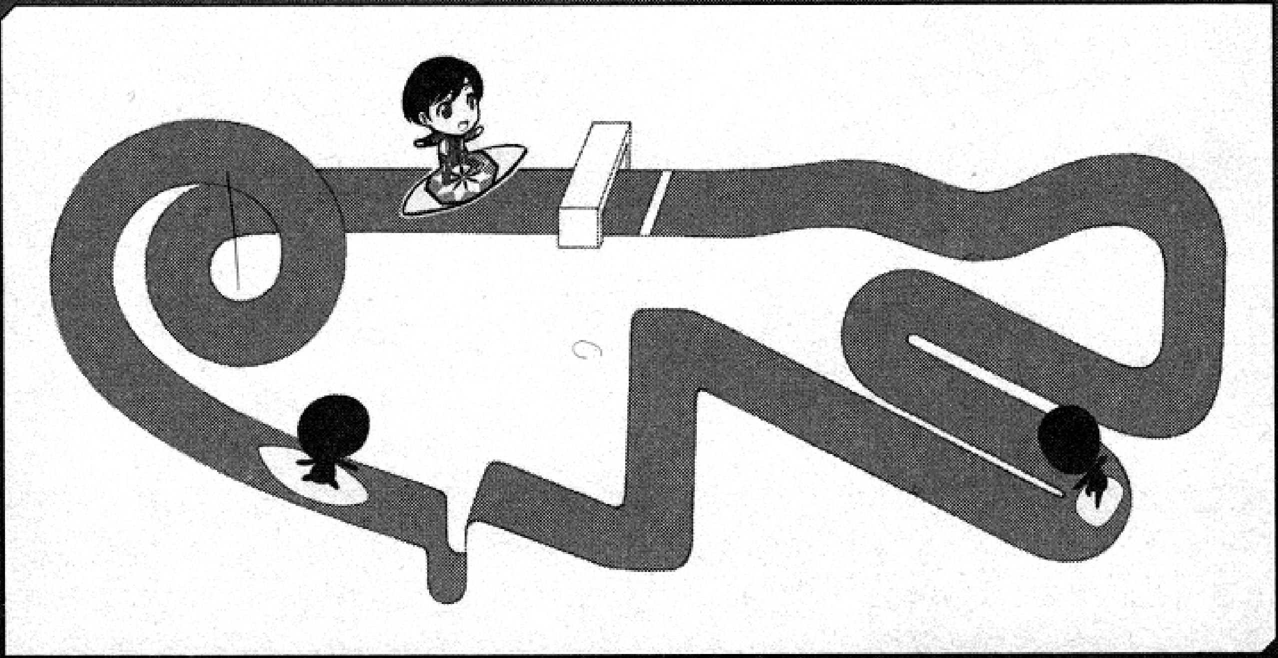

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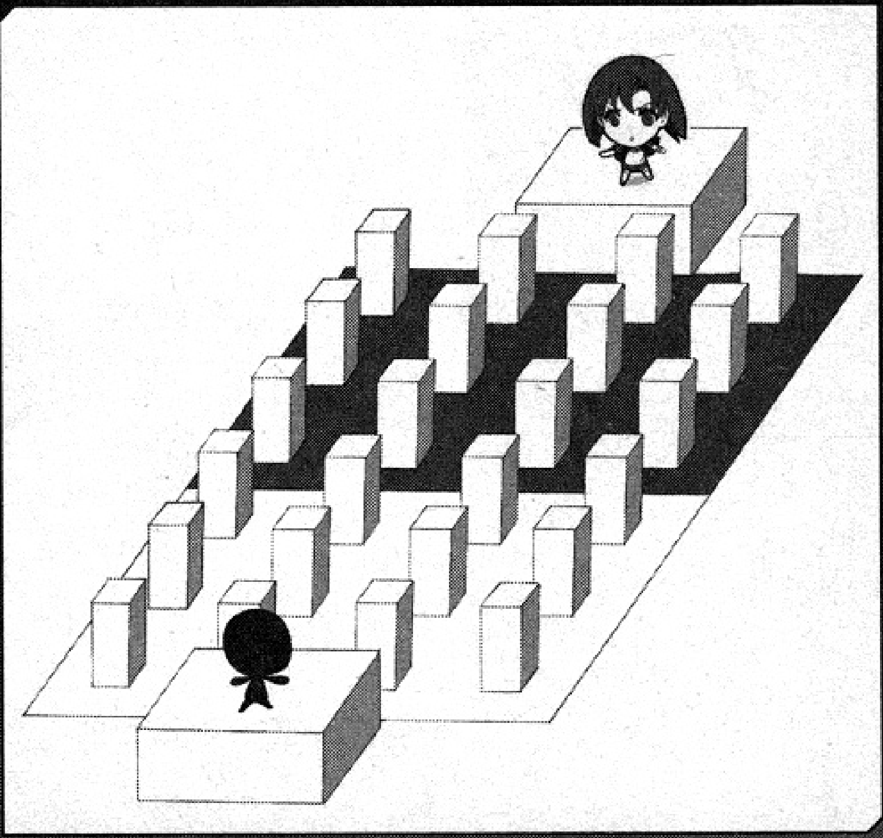
There is no need to use the body, since Players compete remotely with magic, so Players may wear whatever they wish, with the only restriction being that [It Must Not Offend Public Order or Morals].
It is said the Women's Pillars Break had become a Fashion Show in recent years.



Battle BoardAmongst Players, this game is called [Surfing]. This game originated as a method for training the naval forces. Players receive a board similar to a surfing board and must complete three laps on an artificial channel three kilometers in length by making full use of magic to propel them forward. Players compete for victory. According to the rules, use of magic to interfere with other players is forbidden. The Preliminaries consists of six races, four players each. Two Semi-finals games are held with three contestants each. A playoff will be held to determine third place, while the top Players from each Semi-finals race will compete one-on-one in the Finals.

Ice Pillars BreakAmongst Players, this game is called [Pillars Break] Each Player stands on a tower four meters in height, defending twelve pillars contained in a twelve meter square area while attacking twelve pillars in the opposition's field. Players compete to destroy the opponent's pillars before their own are broken. There is no need to use the body, since Players compete remotely with magic, so Players may wear whatever they wish, with the only restriction being that [It Must Not Offend Public Order or Morals]. It is said the Women's Pillars Break had become a Fashion Show in recent years.

Mirage Bat

Amongst Players, this game is called [Mirage].

It is a women's only game. A holographic sphere is projected in the air, and Players must compete by using magic to rise into the air and hitting the orbs with their sticks.

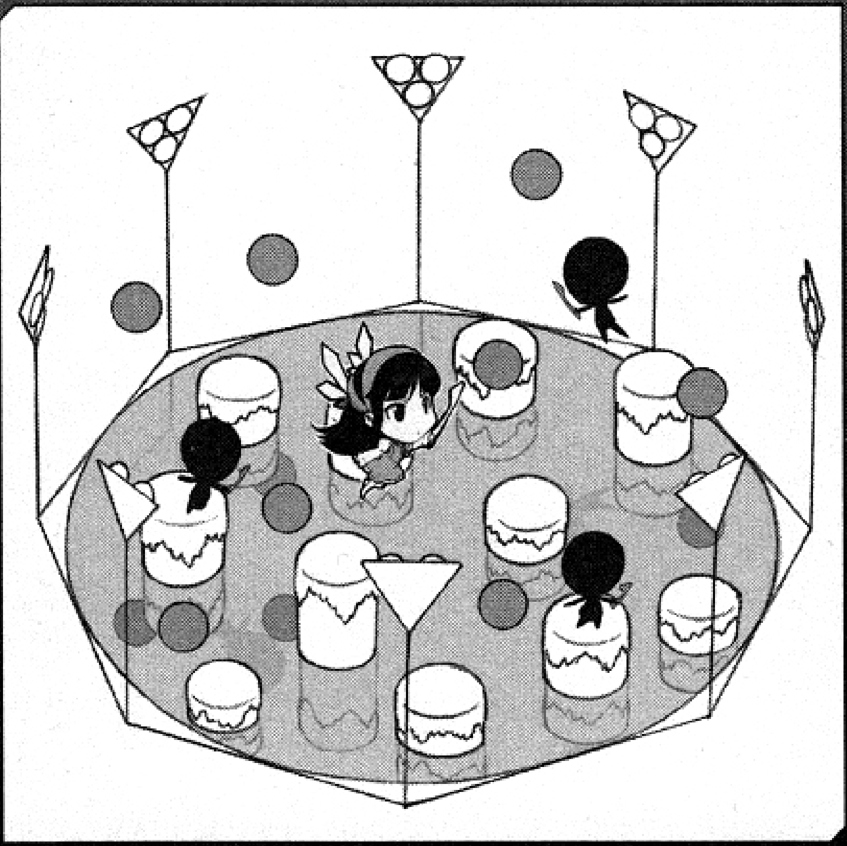
Though this competition has the fewest number of games of all in the Nine-Schools Competition, the play time is typically the longest.

During the game, Players must continuously invoke magic to leap into the air.

It is said the burden is similar to running a full marathon.

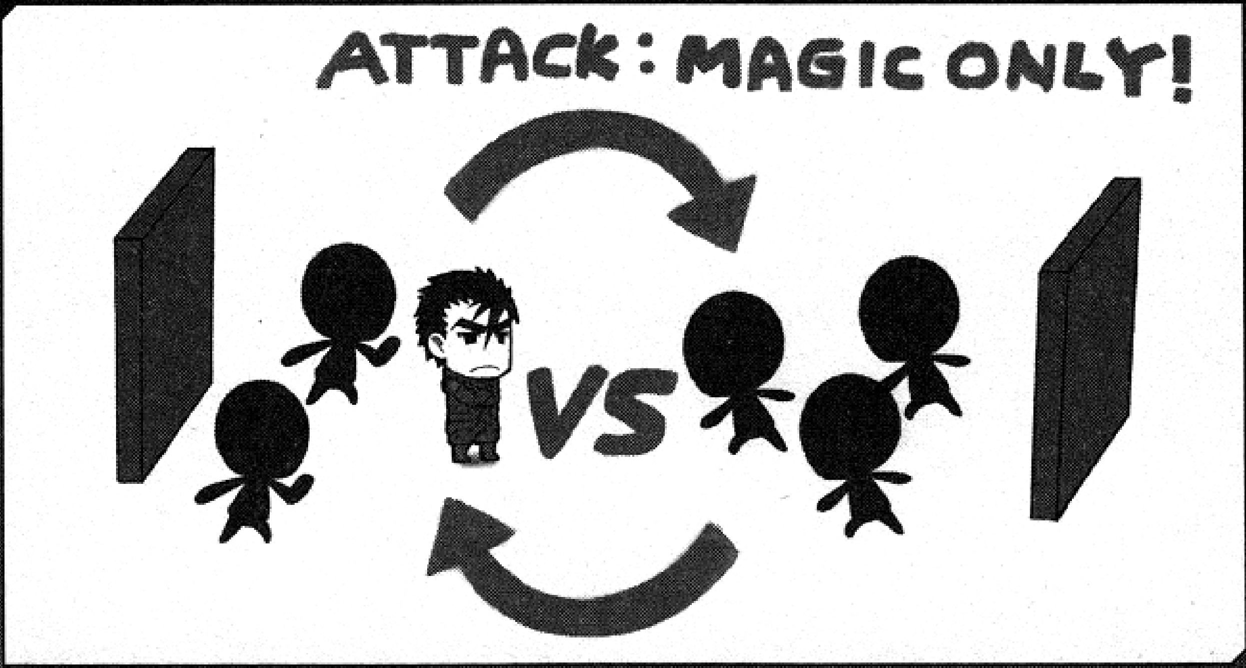
The Nine-Schools Competition Mirage Bat is an event held only amongst women.

With their elaborate costumes and how they fly around, they are often likened to fairies.



Monolith Code

Amongst Players, this game is called [Monolith]. It is a men's only game. At the competition site, called a [Stage], magic is used to fight over the [Monolith], with each team having three players. The outcome is determined by splitting the monolith in the enemy encampment and transmitting a concealed code. Any attacks other than magic are forbidden. Breaking the monolith requires that it be struck with a special Non-Systemic Magic. Due to the nature of the event, this game is the most popular amongst the Nine-Schools Competition.



Mirage BatAmongst Players, this game is called [Mirage]. It is a women's only game. A holographic sphere is projected in the air, and Players must compete by using magic to rise into the air and hitting the orbs with their sticks. Though this competition has the fewest number of games of all in the Nine-Schools Competition, the play time is typically the longest. During the game, Players must continuously invoke magic to leap into the air. It is said the burden is similar to running a full marathon. The Nine-Schools Competition Mirage Bat is an event held only amongst women. With their elaborate costumes and how they fly around, they are often likened to fairies.

Monolith CodeAmongst Players, this game is called [Monolith]. It is a men's only game. At the competition site, called a [Stage], magic is used to fight over the [Monolith], with each team having three players. The outcome is determined by splitting the monolith in the enemy encampment and transmitting a concealed code. Any attacks other than magic are forbidden. Breaking the monolith requires that it be struck with a special Non-Systemic Magic. Due to the nature of the event, this game is the most popular amongst the Nine-Schools Competition.

Chapter 8

It's the fourth day of the tournament.

There's a break before the finals, five days from now, and the fight between the 1st Years in the Newcomer's Battle will take place in the meanwhile.

So far the results stand with First High being at number one with 320 points, Third High being at number two with 225 points, and the positions of third place and below being a wild free for all between the other schools. The difference between first and second place is a massive 95 points. However, the battle is such that even that point difference could potentially be reversed if Third High is able to win the Newcomer's Battle by a large margin, which for them is not impossible. Conversely, even if First High doesn't manage to win, yet they avoid a huge difference in points, final victory would still be theirs.

The aim for every school is overall victory, but in this case, as only half the points gained from the Newcomer's Battle will be added to the overall ranking, to the competing 1st Years what they are fighting for in the Newcomer's Battle is their own glory. The spirit in these matches is in no way inferior to the finals themselves.

The order is the same as the finals.

Today's events are Speed Shooting (Qualifier, Finals) and Battle Board (Qualifier).

They differ from the finals in that the schedule for Speed Shooting includes the women's event in the morning and men's in the afternoon, with everything being finished in one stretch (the reason being that the Speed Shooting finals is carried out straight after the opening ceremony, and there's no way to finish everything by the morning.)

Not just Speed Shooting, but CAD adjustment cannot be carried out in the middle of any event, so the major work of fine tuning whilst listening to the contestants' specifications is done by the engineers in between matches.

That's why engineers are basically always around the players they're responsible for during the match. In order to ensure as much as possible that contestants from the same school in the same competition are not competing at the same time, the Convention Committee have made numerous adjustments to the timetable.

However, in events like Crowd Ball where many matches would occur in a day, overlaps can't be helped, and engineers would often be paired as a duo of main and sub.

This can occur even in the same competition, and one engineer cannot be responsible for another match occurring at the same time.

Even if that match ostensibly occurs at an unrelated time.

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"Honoka is in the last race huh......"

"Yes! It's in the afternoon, so it doesn't clash with the women's Speed Shooting!"

Honoka, grinning earnestly while subtly emitting an overbearing pressure, made Tatsuya relive the heat of being popular.

Tatsuya was responsible for the women's Speed Shooting, women's Icicle Destruction, and Mirage Bat.

He didn't get himself assigned to that host of women's events because he was a womanizer, but because there was a strong backlash against him from the men's 1st Year division.

Not only that, but he was in high demand amongst some of the women's 1st Year contingent.

For example Miyuki, Honoka, Miyuki and Honoka, Miyuki and......in other words, those two had appealed rather earnestly.

But here lay a problem.

Miyuki's sheer magic power was most suited for the competition Icicle Destruction.

Both her classmates and the council knew full well her proficiency in slowing down vibrations. When all is said and done, cooling magic is pretty much second nature to her.

Miyuki's participation in Icicle Destruction was decided, as well as in Mirage Bat as the star athlete and ace of the women's team — the problem was what Honoka would participate in.

In terms of First High's practical results, in first place was Shiba Miyuki, second was Kitayama Shizuku, third was Morisaki Shun, and fourth was Mitsui Honoka. Therefore amongst the 1st Year female students Honoka ranked right alongside both Miyuki and Shizuku in practical excellence, but in truth her skills were not particularly suited for a sporting magic competition.

Her specialization in magical illusions involving manipulating light was impressive, but Shizuku's ability in high output vibration and acceleration was more suitable for Icicle Destruction.

It was a given from the start that Tatsuya would be responsible for Miyuki. Not even the seniors were foolish enough to try and challenge that.

So in order to be looked after by Tatsuya, it's most reliable to get into the same competitions as Miyuki, but for the number one, number two and number three top players to appear in the same competition is not a very sound strategy. ......or rather, it's impossible.

Therefore it would fall to a competition which does not overlap, but unfortunately, Shizuku was also more suited for Speed Shooting. The competition had initially called for contestants to enter in their field of expertise, so you could say she had little hope of being considered from the start.

Following that train of thought, it was decided that Honoka would compete in Battle Board and Mirage Bat. (The organizers had at first floated the idea of Battle Board and Crowd Ball, but due to her own wishes and the vocal support of her friends, she was able to get into one event with Miyuki.) ......In a situation like this, with her line "the events won't clash", just what is Honoka really trying to say, Tatsuya wondered.

But even if the time was compatible, from a team perspective, changing the engineer responsible at this late stage was impossible.

And even if today was alright, on the sixth day — the third day in terms of the Newcomer's Battle — no one could guarantee that there wouldn't be an overlap between Icicle Destruction and Battle Board.

Honoka too should have been well aware of that, but......

It seemed that Miyuki was not about to come to his rescue today. Faced with Honoka on one side and his sister on the other, each with a different motive, Tatsuya sighed and came out with a bifurcated response.

"......I'd like to maintain your CAD in truth, but that's not possible, so I'll watch your race at the least."

"Really? It's a promise!"

Someone gave a small ominous laugh. Tatsuya knew more than well whose voice that was, but his consciousness chose to pretend he didn't.

From an outsider's perspective, maybe he really was a 'womanizer'...... probably.

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Although the parties involved would never think of it as 'trivial', from the perspective of the main story, this was just a side episode.

When the curtains rise, one must be absolutely focused.

With the final checks complete, Tatsuya handed over the dedicated Speed Shooting CAD shaped like an elongated rifle, and confirmed its condition with Shizuku.

The CAD absorbs psions from the magician, which the Psion Information Aide transmits into the Activation Sequence. If a problem occurs in this process, no matter how well the other parts are serviced, it's pointless.

If the problem occurs with the hardware it has to be replaced with a spare device, and if the problem lies in the software it has to be reworked on the fly.

"Nn...... perfect. It feels better than my own."

As both her face and voice were rather deadpan, after initially being paired with Shizuku, Tatsuya had sometimes been confused as to whether she was serious or not; but now he was pretty much used to it.

Basically, she doesn't lie.

In the worst case, she would simply remain silent.

"Tatsuya-san, you won't consider being hired?"

However, in cases like these, he still can't get used to whether she's serious or joking.

"If you're in a position to joke like this right before the match, you'll be just fine."

"It wasn't a joke."

"......"

By the way, what she was saying had the meaning of "formally signing on a contract to perform CAD maintenance".

Shizuku had asked him "won't you be hired" more than 10 times already. Considering her personality, Tatsuya had thought it a long running gag, but now it seemed that wasn't the case.

"It won't be an exclusive contract so you don't have to worry."

In order to make references for CAD arrangements, Tatsuya had taken her CAD in hand and adjusted it.

Before that, the one who had maintained Shizuku's CAD was a famous engineer who could be ranked amongst the top five in the country.

Or rather than Shizuku, it would be more accurate to say the Kitayama house.

When Tatsuya had first heard he was not surprised, but then again Shizuku's family were 'extremely rich' after all.

In the first place, the mages of the Kitayama house did not hold the same prestige as the Ten Master Houses or the 100 Families.

Shizuku's mother, a magician, had fallen in love with her millionaire father at first sight, and after much strife they were finally married, at which, the paternal lineage turned up no mages — her young brother having some measure of practical ability but not enough for true magic.

Whether because of those circumstances, in contrast there was Shizuku — her raw magic potential being extraordinary.

Shizuku's addiction to Monolith Code could be said to stem from her father's financial prowess, being able to tour the country seeing magic competitions every year.

"......I think I've said this numerous times, but that would require me to have a license wouldn't it?"

When Tatsuya did not respond, Shizuku had presented him with a down payment and contract fees which even considering his position as part of Taurus Silver and the considerable income that came with it, was an unprecedented sum.

If he had been just a normal student, that dazzling amount would have made his eyes water.

But although doing this as part of a school event meant he received no compensation, it would have been different if he took it as a real job with remuneration. It's not illegal to work without a license, but in the eyes of the world, he would be seen as a 'fake'.

"I understand."

As always, Shizuku gave a dutiful nod.

But whether she truly understood was doubtful.

What it was for Shizuku only she herself knew, but for Tatsuya it was a conversation that significantly lowered tension in the moments before the match.

Well, whatever the effect, as long as nothing adverse happened it'd be nice.

They had gone through strategic meetings many times before.

For Shizuku, Tatsuya had devised a CAD and a secret plan to go along with it. (The début of the 'plan' was meant to be in the finals of the tournament, but still.)

"You're up, Shizuku."

"Yeah."

There was only one thing to say in this moment before her time.

"Alright, do your best!"

"Yeah, I will!"

It was simple, but that was also a strategy of last resort.

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"Is this seat available?"

"Ah, Miyuki. It's fine. Go right ahead."

In truth that question had been asked to the sitting girls by various people for a while, but unlike the one asking now all had various ulterior motives (if you don't mind sitting between Leo and Mikihiko!). In this rather menacing way, Erika had scared off countless lying chick cruisers and kept the seat vacant.

The order in which they sat was Mikihiko, Mizuki, Honoka, vacant, Erika, Leo. They had left Miyuki's seat in the middle because if they were not on guard some unknown shady character might approach from either side. At first Erika had been reluctant to sit next to Leo, but at Mizuki's subtle argument that Leo and Honoka were not only in different classes but hardly knew each other, she had been finally persuaded. That incident almost but not quite resembled the nowadays rare event called a catfight.

Before Miyuki had come, the four excluding Honoka had been looking over the schedule of the Newcomer's Battle, and were holding a pamphlet intended for the audience (Honoka was a contestant so she had no need to recheck at this point).

After looking up to greet Miyuki, Mizuki returned to looking at the pamphlet, but not before noticing Honoka's faint expression.

"......Honoka-san, are you prepared?"

"It's fine. My race is in the afternoon."

Honoka answered Mizuki with a slightly forced smile.

Miyuki replied to that in an incredulous tone.

"Ho-no-ka. If you're this nervous before the match, you'll be in big trouble later you know?"

"Uu, I know but......"

"You'll be fine, Honoka. Onii-sama said so as well didn't he?"

"Ye, yeah......"

"You came to see this to take your mind off your race didn't you? For now, let's cheer Shizuku on."

"......yeah, you're right."

From her rather exaggerated nod, it was evident she wasn't totally relaxed. That serious-to-a-fault way of thinking was a strong point of her personality, so you could almost say it was unavoidable tension.

"......um, did I say something unnecessary?"

At Mizuki's follow-up, devoid of malice, Honoka simply lowered her face.

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A bit away from those 1st Years, or rather their boisterous play, the 3rd Year trio Student Council and Public Morals Committee chiefs were gathered.

"Mari, is it alright for you not to sleep?"

"I'm not sick. As long as I don't have to fight I'll be fine. More than that, Mayumi, is it alright for you to be away from your duties?"

"It's fine. It's not like I'm kilometers away, and if anything comes up I can be informed instantly."

Saying so, Mayumi brushed away the hair hanging over her cheek.

That act revealed the receiver in her ear for voice communications.

"Still, if it were just Mayumi it would be business as usual, but for Ichihara to be away as well makes me wonder."

"No problem. It seems I've been forced off duty today."

"......your jokes are hard to understand as ever, Ichihara."

At that tongue in cheek answer, Mari was suspicious for a moment if there was any dissatisfaction at that supplanting of their staff role.

Of course, she knew full well that wasn't the case.

Suzune bore overall responsibility for the operations staff (although there are only four people in that capacity), but individual strategic planning followed division of labor. The greatest responsibility was divided, with male staff going over strategies for the men's matches and female staff going over strategies for the women's matches.

Today's competition was the women's Speed Shooting contest, under the charge of Suzune.

—But, this was an event which didn't allow for fine strategies in the first place, being largely dependent on technical ability. It wouldn't be far off the mark to even say brute force. Any staff involvement would merely detail the selection of magic to match the characteristics of the competitor, and the setting of the CAD to suit, but...

...this was a region which overlapped the work of the technical staff.

Furthermore for the 1st Year women's Speed Shooting, the CAD magic selection, settings and all, Tatsuya handled everything from planning to execution.

That being said, Suzune had been aware of the plan and approved it from the start.

She wasn't the type to be put on the back foot by something of this level.

"Now then...... come to think of it, this will be the first time I see something he's engineered used in a combat capacity."

At Mari's words brimming with curiosity, Mayumi also looked over at the arena with interest.

"That's true. During my time, he was a great help. I'm looking forward to seeing how a CAD he's adjusted from the start will perform."

"Starting with Kitayama-san, it seems he's become very popular with the team."

Suzune's words held no exaggeration.

Initially amongst First High's 1st Year women's team, with the exception of Miyuki, Honoka and Shizuku, Tatsuya being in the same year, and furthermore a Course 2 student, seemed to provoke an almost allergic reaction from the other members when it came to giving him their CAD for adjustment.

But after a few practices with the CADs he calibrated, any such negative feelings completely vanished.

Perhaps it'd be more suitable to call that change of heart 'being blown away'.

"It seems that today there are also a few contestants who have brought their own CADs."

At Suzune's words, Mari made a sound of surprise.

"Hey hey...... wouldn't that cause problems in the match?"

"That's just another sign of Shiba-kun's amazing control. It seems he'll service them after the match is over."

Service refers to the adjustment of the CAD.

The contestants using Tatsuya's competition adjusted CADs were even bringing him their personal CADs to adjust. Furthermore, rather than just one or two, it was more like the entire female 1st Year team.

"His fans seem to be steadily increasing."

"The good natures of people come out in the strangest of places."

Both Mayumi and Mari, exchanging a glance, shared a small chuckle.

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If Tatsuya himself had been faced with Mayumi's remark 'his fans are increasing', he would have vehemently denied it.

In fact, during social events, he went out of his way to avoid women (or so he felt).

Needless to say however, he didn't possess any such 'divine ears'.

His attention was focused solely on the shooting range Shizuku now stood at.

He did not possess 'eyes' like Mizuki.

He did however have the power to analyze data structures.

The data structures he himself had written and programmed into the CAD were all in his head.

If she put her hands even slightly together, while he could not perceive the 'hand' he could predict the 'result'.

Shizuku took her stance.

The lights on the start ramp began to light up.

(It seems this time it's alright.)

There was no evidence of the tampering which had caused problems such as in Mari's case, Tatsuya thought, yet he didn't divert his 'eye'.

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The moment all the lights came on, a clay target flew into the air.

And the moment it entered the scoring area, it was blown apart.

The next target was shattered in the middle of the area.

Next, two were simultaneously destroyed at either end.

A sigh rose from the audience. If one looked closely, Miyuki and the others were also sighing in relief at this brilliantly smooth start, letting out the breath they had been holding.

Shizuku's eyes didn't deviate for a second.

She simply gazed straight ahead, almost as if not looking at the targets.

"Uwah, amazing!"

In contrast to Erika's simple admiration,

"......is the Magic Activation Zone set for the entire area?"

Mizuki asked Miyuki and Honoka rather doubtfully.

"That's correct. Shizuku is able to tag all solids that enter the area with magic vibratory waves, destroying the target. By generating compression waves inside the target, it undergoes repeated partial expansion and contraction. If this rapid heating and cooling is repeated, it's only logical that even solid rock would weaken and collapse."

"To be precise, she sets numerous epicenters within the scoring area, which generate the virtual waves that give rise to the vibratory waves within the targets. Rather than directly applying the waves to the targets with magic, she has set up an area which causes the phenomena of applying such waves to the targets. The moment the waves from the epicenter come into contact with such a target, the virtual waves become real waves within the target and affect it in reality."

As Honoka and Miyuki carried out their polite commentary whilst their eyes remained fixed on the shooting range, Mizuki simply nodded.

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"......is the mechanism involved."

Whether by chance or necessity, the 3rd Year trio was also having the same conversation at the same time.

"As you know, the effective scoring area in Speed Shooting is a cube of 15 meter proportions set in the air. Shiba-kun's Activation Sequence sets another cube within this which is 10 meters on each side, with the vertices and the center, nine points in total, being designated as epicenters."

The one who had first made that explanation was Tatsuya. Suzune had been shown the plan.

"Each point is labeled with a number, and when that number is entered into the live Activation Sequence, virtual waves spread from that point.

The reach of the waves is six meters. In other words the moment the magic is activated, all targets within a six meter radius from the epicenter will be destroyed."

"......it rather feels like it's using unnecessary force...... is Kitayama alright with those settings?"

"Although it has to be said that Kitayama-san is better known for her power than her precision......"

At Mari's pause, Suzune was wearing her typical cool poker face. But within her eyes, the shadow of a sympathetic laugh could be found.

"The aim of this magic is not to compensate for accuracy, but rather to increase speed at the expense of accuracy."

"......In other words, you're implying that a more pinpoint aiming solution is possible right? Please elaborate?"

"The feature of this magic is that it is coordinated by numbers."

Returning her gaze to the 1st Year before them, Suzune began her explanation to Mayumi's question. Her fluent reply was probably because she had gotten an answer after earlier asking the exact same thing.

"In Speed Shooting, the position of the contestants and the distance, direction and size of the scoring area is always the same. In other words the focal points necessary in this magic to set the virtual cube in relation to the distance, and viewing angle of the player, are constants.

Therefore there is no need to enter variable coordinates separately each time, but instead you can simply input into the Activation Sequence the number you desire and instantly invoke the magic. For this rough degree of aim, using the auxiliary aiming systems built into the CAD, it's possible for the optimal point to be automatically picked out.

Furthermore, this magic doesn't require changes in duration or power either. There isn't any need. In truth, they're treated as constants by the Activation Sequence. The contestant, just by selecting a point with the aid of the CAD without needing to think of any other variables, can simply pull the virtual trigger and end up destroying the target."

The shoot was approaching the end.

Not a single target had been missed.

"Since there's no need to physically interface with the controls, merely invoking the magic will fully realize the potential of effect. I do believe the continuous Activation utilizes Multicast as well."

The shoot drew to a close.

Final result, perfect.

"The proper name of the magic is 'Active Air Mine'. It seems to be a Shiba-kun original. Well, all the numerous elements jammed in make the final Activation Sequence quite a beast, but Kitayama-san's formidable magic power makes up for it."

"......it's pretty much the exact opposite of Mayumi's magic isn't it?"

"......coming up with a sequence like this is quite something."

Mayumi's voice held not so much admiration as outright amazement.

"Still...... it's rather intriguing."

On the other hand, Mari's voice was filled with interest.

"In battle the relative position between you and your opponents will by no means remain the same, so from the view of marksman magic it's not quite combat worthy, but...... if instead of setting the cube in the air, you center it as a sphere around yourself, wouldn't it serve very admirably in all directions as an active shield?"

"The problem is activation duration. If you set it too short the timing will be difficult, but too long and you risk yourself being caught in the area of effect."

Despite these issues presented by Mayumi, Mari's enthusiasm didn't dampen in the slightest.

"That will be up to the operator's skill. As you said, if you're able to gauge the timing you can set the duration to be short no problem. ......alright, immediately after this I'm going to nab him and install it by tonight."

"......try not to cause any problems for the competitors."

Mayumi's voice as she responded was now 100% amazement.

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"Good work."

As Shizuku returned from the shooting range, Tatsuya offered up words of praise along with a towel. The engineer isn't the manager so there's no need for him to have a towel handy, but he wasn't one to fall for such petty pride.

"It was somewhat anticlimactic."

She wasn't blustering in any way — it seemed she really felt so.

Whilst wiping the sweat from her brow, Shizuku had a slightly dissatisfied look.

Still at the same time, her joy was plain to see (it wasn't like she was trying to hide it or anything anyway.)

The qualifying score needed for the Newcomer's Battle was around 80% each year.

Because it was impossible to score any higher than what she had gotten, regardless of the borderline she would obviously advance to the finals.

"I don't think anything went through the blind spots, as expected; they didn't try such obstinate unsporting things."

The magic Shizuku had used did not cover the entire scoring area. The area around the outer edges could be considered blind spots.

However, as seen from the performance of the machine launching the clay targets, there were no last minute changes to the trajectory of the targets. If a target had not passed right through the scoring area, the entire shoot would have to be redone out of issues of fairness, a blunder on the part of the tournament committee. Due to the nature of the competition, that was a risk they didn't need.

They had made a strategy covering even that eventuality so it wasn't particularly a big concern, but not having to rely on that backup was something to be relieved about after all.

"Tatsuya-san, you worry too much. To try for that they'd have to deliberately probe for the blind spots, something too high level for the Newcomer's Battle."

Shizuku's words were only right.

Tatsuya put such things out of his mind, and switched to Shizuku's perspective.

"At first we'll go according to plan. But from the quarterfinals on will be match format. I'll service your CAD in the morning, so be sure to let me take a look."

"Got it."

The format between the qualifier and finals is different. The qualifier is to see how many of the 100 clay targets you can destroy in five minutes, a test of the speed and reliability of your magic. In the finals however, it's a test to see which player can destroy the most targets being fired into the same area. The factors of speed and reliability are joined by raw power and the ability to overcome interference from your opponents. As per the nature of this competition, the magic you normally use will also change accordingly.

Depending on the type of magic to be used, it's not uncommon to change the specialized CADs used for the competition themselves.

Tatsuya was now making preparations for the next contestants — for the next match that would follow, and the one after that.

Shizuku went alone to the storage tent to fetch the CADs used for the tournament finals.

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"All three of them qualified huh......"

Back in the tent which served as the headquarters of First High, Mayumi went over the results of the Speed Shooting preliminaries.

Whilst looking, Mayumi gave a small soliloquy.

"Maybe the 1st Year girls this year are just of a special level?"

Eight names had qualified for the finals from a preliminary of twenty four.

Three of those eight names were from the same school, having made it through to the finals of the Newcomer's Battle, an unprecedented number.

"Mari, won't you give up your pretense?"

Mayumi's remarks were normally followed by a tsukkomi by Mari, but this time she simply shrugged in silence.

Her pose seemed to suggest futility.

"I wonder how the Battle Board will turn out."

At Mayumi's question, Suzune deliberately took out her terminal and checked. ('Deliberately' in the sense that she knew in her head already.)

"The men's team missed the cut even after the second race, while the women's qualified after the first."

"The men are down to one last guy huh. On the girls' side, Mitsui-san's in the last race and is certain to make it through the prelims...... it seems A-chan has been working hard."

As Mayumi muttered to herself,

"We may want to devote a bit more time to technical skills on our side as well."

Looking over the same report card from his own terminal, Katsuto responded in disgust.

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The quarterfinals of Speed Shooting took place on four shooting ranges.

If the eight who had advanced to the tournament proper were all from different schools the semis could have been resolved in four simultaneous games, but at the presence of competitors from the same school, the games had to be adjusted so as to not overlap (there is no competition between entrants of the same school during the semis.)

That being said, compared to conducting the semis one by one on a single range, the interval between each game was rather short. As three of First High's women's team had advanced to the semis, the engineers were kept very busy.

"......Tatsuya-san, is everything alright?"

Being last in turn, Shizuku reflexively spoke up when Tatsuya rushed in as she sat in the waiting room (although since she was in a tent, it couldn't strictly be called a 'room').

Maybe it was a trick of the mind, but it seemed to her that he was also slightly out of breath.

"It's fine."

With that short answer, Tatsuya began a final check of the CAD.

As Shizuku looked on — or rather stared — he rapidly scrolled through the monitor of the adjustment device ensuring there were no abnormalities, before finally meeting Shizuku's eye.

"I think you already know, but this is a totally different model from the ones used in the preliminaries. There's almost no time now, but if there's even the slightest discomfort, I'll re-adjust it as much as possible so please feel free to tell me anything."

Taking the CAD from Tatsuya, Shizuku took a stance and after repeatedly pulling the trigger with her finger two, three times, she put the CAD down.

"There's nothing of the sort. Rather, it fits so well it's almost frightening."

"I see."

She didn't thump her chest or anything, but at Tatsuya's relieved look, Shizuku's expression filled with fighting spirit.

"The other two won didn't they?"

"Yeah."

The other two, referred to her teammates who had already gone.

Those two, who had along with Shizuku advanced to the finals tournament, seemed to have clinched a win in the semi finals as well.

"It's fine."

Once again, Tatsuya used the same words, but with a different meaning.

"If Shizuku performs as usual, you'll definitely win."

"Of course."

At that, Shizuku gave a brief yet far more vigorous than usual nod.

"Tatsuya-san has already made all the arrangements I need for victory, so all that's left is for me to take it."

"That's the spirit."

Without challenging her early declaration of success, Tatsuya saw her off with a smile.

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"It's finally Shizuku-san's turn."

"Hey hey, if even Mizuki is nervous how should I cope?"

"But aren't you all excited as well Erika-chan? If Shizuku-san wins here, three of the final best four will be from our school!"

"Aren't you a bit too nervous regardless? Shizuku is definitely going to win after all."

At that confident affirmation, mingled with a teasing remark from Miyuki to 'take a deep breath and calm down', Mizuki obediently cleared her mind and inhaled.

"......I wonder if this also counts as a sort of promise."

"......I guess even Mizuki-san can be playful at times."

Rather than as a result of the deep breathing, but more from not wanting to cause Miyuki and Honoka any more worry, Mizuki finally regained her composure.

"I wonder what kind of twist we'll see this time."

Hearing Mikihiko's voice bearing a hint of excitement, Erika made a 'huh?' expression.

"Good point. What will jump out this time, I can't even begin to guess."

The one who actually responded aloud was Leo.

"His mind is almost like a jack-in-the-box."

"You can talk."

For Mikihiko to look forward to and show interest in magic was something Erika hadn't seen for a long time.

Whether this change had been brought about simply by watching the competition with others, she couldn't say. Perhaps without her knowing, something had happened between Tatsuya and Mikihiko...... without voicing anything aloud, Erika pondered such things.

"Eh? That's......"

Breaking her out of her train of thought and back to reality was a querulous voice.

"What is it?"

"That CAD.....?"

Mikihiko's gaze was fixed on the CAD Shizuku held under her arm by a strap.

That rifle shaped CAD at first glance, with the exception of the strap, was no different from the CAD the other contestants were using. But the area of the gun where ammunition would normally be stored was thicker than the others.

Mikihiko's school traditionally didn't place much emphasis on CADs. They still mainly utilized magic activated by charms. But ever since the accident last year, Mikihiko had obsessively been studying up on modern magic technology.

To compensate for what he had lost.

The result of that had been evident in his test results.

Mikihiko had considerably more confidence in CADs than comparable modern mages.

If his eyes weren't mistaken.

"Is that...... a general purpose CAD?"

"Eh, you're kidding?"

"Yeah, well, it is."

"I've never heard of a general CAD shaped like a rifle before. Firstly, isn't combining auxiliary sighting systems into a general system technically impossible?"

It was only natural that Leo, Mizuki, and Erika would ask one question after another.

But Mikihiko simply shook his head with confidence.

"The arrangement of the body portion just above the trigger of the CAD is without a doubt FLT's general purpose 'Centaur' series. The Centaur series is a type which doesn't have any interfaces on the main body and can be used without any external input devices, but the connector has had a grip and auxiliary aim assist system attached."

"You really know your stuff."

Miyuki's words as she turned around and grinned confirmed Mikihiko's observations.

"Eh? Then, that is?"

"You're right Erika. That's specially handcrafted by Onii-sama. It was specifically made to incorporate auxiliary aiming systems into a general purpose CAD."

At Miyuki's proud words, the knowledge that the CAD was a special made-to-order model, Erika was rendered speechless at the amount of effort that must have taken.

"I don't think I could feel any more surprised but...... just what is it all for?"

"Of course, for the match."

Honoka's brief answer was not near enough to satisfy Leo's, and the other three's questions.

But no subsequent explanation followed through.

As if by common consent, the six of them faced forwards. The signal for the start of the match began to light up.

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Red and white clay targets danced in the sky.

Shizuku's targets were the red ones.

The three red targets that twisted through the air and entered the scoring zone, flew together towards the center and shattered.

"Movement system...... no, that's wrong. Convergence system?"

In the tent used by each school as a headquarters, large monitors covering every aspect of the competitions gave full view of the matches underway.

Both Suzune and Mayumi were watching Shizuku's match on the monitor with their full attention.

"Correct."

This time, all red targets which entered the scoring area were being drawn into the middle and destroyed.

"That's the magic used in the qualifiers isn't it?"

"Yes. It's a continuous invocation of convergence magic and vibration magic."

Two of the white targets collided and broke apart.

The opponent from Second High was using an orthodox tactic of targeting the clay itself using movement magic, and turning it into a bullet to hit other targets.

Although orthodox, its effectiveness had been amply demonstrated by past performances.

But from the outset, the majority of the targets being removed from around the outer area were white.

Since most of those had been hit around the outer edge, the problem lay not in the technical ability of the contestant but rather...

"I get that the area of effect is able to recognize the targets on a macro level and enhance the density of red targets in the center via convergence, whilst displacing the white targets from that center but......"

The basic form of Convergence Magic works by defining existing space via the Magic Ritual, then taking that defined 'data' and selectively manipulating it via designated coordinates using that same Magic Ritual.

For example, Mayumi's magic which utilizes dry ice to make bullets and send them flying, in order to create a sufficient number of bullets, initially also uses Convergence Magic to gather carbon dioxide.

In this case, carbon dioxide is collected in one place while other gases are pushed aside, but this does not mean a high density mass of carbon dioxide is made, as the CO2 rather flows through designated coordinates whilst other gases are drawn out.

In the same manner, Shizuku's magic replaced carbon dioxide with red targets.

A special zone — in this case, the center of the scoring area — was set up as a 'space where red targets are gathered' by that Systematic Convergence Magic.

More specifically a square space 20 meters per side, comfortably covering the entire scoring area and more, was magically altered to become a 'space with a high density of red clay targets in the center.'

The volume of that area is huge, but as the total number of clay targets at any one time is small, there isn't a large burden on the operator. What is modified isn't the space itself, but rather the distribution of clay targets within that space.

The modification of data via the Magic Ritual results in red targets being drawn to the center of the area, while white targets are repelled. The targets the Second High contestant directly controlled weren't affected by such minor interference, but the targets the Second High student tried to hit, due to not receiving any magic from her, had their trajectories changed by Shizuku's magic and as a result, white targets began to be missed.

The rules of the Speed Shooting tournament finals state that as long as you do not directly attack your opponent, interference is allowed. But as the clay targets fly for only short irregular periods, it's very hard to block your opponent and shoot your own targets at the same time. There were many cases when vacillating between sniping and interfering resulted in self destruction, but as Shizuku's Systematic Convergence Magic flawlessly linked disturbing the opponent and destroying one's own targets, it was a very skillful strategy.

While few, there are some examples of this strategy being used in the past, all of which shared one effect. As strong interference strength is needed, the strategy involves the selection of an appropriate contestant. Therefore while the window of opportunity is small, Mayumi had also firmly studied this tactic.

So what Mayumi was asking concerning this magic was not that in itself.

"But then, how is she able to turn on and off the Systematic Vibration Magic at the end?"

If multiple targets flew together, they would shatter as is.

If a red target was alone however, vibration magic was used to destroy it.

It had been configured as a single magic, so for her to be able to independently trigger the Systematic Vibration Magic to destroy targets was peculiar.

"I wonder if it's been scheduled that multiple targets would fly together before the Vibration Magic has a chance to trigger?"

Mayumi's tone as she reasoned to herself said that not even she believed it.

There's no merit to applying such a time difference.

"Pres, I did say it was 'continuous invocation of Systematic Convergence Magic and Systematic Vibration Magic' didn't I?"

With a sly smile, Suzune corrected Mayumi's misunderstanding.

Mayumi immediately understood the meaning of those words.

And upon reflection, immediately cried a rebuttal.

"No way! The systems in a specialized CAD should only be able to store one single Activation Sequence!?"

"Your doubts are well founded, except that's not a specialized CAD, but a general one."

Suzune's answer only brought Mayumi still more confusion.

"That's impossible! The hardware, OS and architecture between specialized and general CADs are totally different.

And auxiliary aiming devices are subsystems which only fit within the architecture of a specialized CAD.

Connecting an auxiliary aiming device to the body of a general CAD is technically impossible isn't it?"

Mayumi's stressful speech gradually settled down, but from the blush of her cheeks it was still possible to glimpse her raw excitement.

Suzune's smile, now calm and mature, turned into something to soothe her companion.

"I thought so too. But, I guess it really is possible. This isn't something original to Shiba-kun, but was announced in Germany a year ago."

"......one year ago, isn't that pretty much state of the art?"

"It's best if you're not surprised simply by this much, Pres. He's being real coy about it, but Shiba-kun has something even more cutting edge in store."

"Hahh...... Well, if it's confidential it can't be helped. But for him to tell Rin-chan about it and not me is a bit of a shock."

"The Pres is a contestant. I'm sure he simply didn't want to upset you."

"I guess...... if I had known about a technique like this in advance, I certainly might have become a bit agitated."

As their eyes returned to the monitor, the scores of both players and the remaining time were displayed onscreen.

With the clock ticking down, victory had already been decided.

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(30 seconds remaining)

Having been repeatedly training these past two weeks, practicing over and over, she was now able to measure exactly the flow of the 5 minutes of the competition.

The moment red clay flew into the blue sphere projected by her goggles, Shizuku triggered her CAD.

The target shattered.

The competition allows the use of the protective goggles to double as a sighting aid. In fact, the number of competitors who don't do so are rare. (The case of players like Mayumi who have their own sights aside.) However, rather than aiming directly at the target, Shizuku's functioned as a HMD (head mount display) in order to distinguish space. Or rather, it should be called Tatsuya's.

As with all the unorthodox techniques Tatsuya had proposed, Shizuku had also been puzzled with this at first. However, possibly because she had no actual competition experience, she fortunately didn't take any time to get used to it. Once she was comfortable, it matched her more perfectly than any other equipment or techniques than she would have believed.

Anyway, it was easy.

There was almost no stress associated with the normal use of magic.

Shizuku herself was aware that her weakness was fine control.

That was why she had requested her CAD engineers to add features that assist in the smoothing of detailed settings.

Even at the expense of speed, her aim was to ensure that her CAD would be able to output power at a reliable level.

She was confident her own ability could compensate for the speed of processing.

However Tatsuya's Sequences made detailed settings unnecessary.

Rather than making up for her shortcomings, the concept was to maximize her advantages.

The intent capitalized on her processing power to continuously trigger a Sequence at high speeds, and her capacity to build large Magic Rituals.

The result was the CAD she now held in her hand.

She had been surprised at him being able to connect an auxiliary aiming system to a general type CAD, but she had been even more surprised at the Activation Sequence speed.

In terms of processing speed, general CADs lose out to specialized ones.

This was not so much common sense, but rather a matter of structure.

General and specialized CADs differ both in their hardware and software.

The difference between them, between a dedicated processor and general processor, is similar to the difference between a dedicated supercomputer and a general one.

Comparing CPU performance in terms of speed, a generic type will never be the equal of a specialized type. This difference in level can usually be felt clearly.

And yet — this CAD demonstrated speed no less to that of a specialized CAD.

(5 more seconds)

—A target came flying.

—She pulled the trigger.

—Magic activated.

—And the target shattered.

This processing speed, even when compared with the specialized CAD used during the preliminaries, showed almost no difference.

Tatsuya had said the trick was because 'it was limited to only two Sequences'.

Since it had been designed exclusively for the competition, he was able to use a trick that would not be viable for daily use.

Shizuku could not understand the detailed theory.

She didn't think it necessary.

Magic was a tool.

The CAD was also a tool.

A tool just needs to be usable.

Any more than that, could be left to the experts.

The last two targets weren't shattered by the 'Air Mine', but by Loop Cast Convergence magic.

"Perfect."

Confirming her performance aloud, Shizuku gave a smile of triumph.

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Noon.

Inside First High School's tent, a jubilant atmosphere filled the air.

"That was brilliant, Tatsuya-kun! What an amazing achievement!"

Having been patted and slapped on the back countless times, Tatsuya was growing tired. Just as Mayumi's slender figure suggested there was no actual pain involved, but her persistence was certainly wearying.

"......Pres, please calm down a little."

Making eye contact with Suzune in a plea for assistance, she immediately began to remonstrate with Mayumi.

Quite the dependable senpai — if not for the fact that she had gone along until being asked for help, making her feel rather more like a 'partner in crime'.

"Ah, I'm sorry."

Perhaps having too much fun and finally coming to her senses, Mayumi immediately stopped the slapping. ......but it didn't seem like she intended to let him go anytime soon.

"Still, that was truly astounding! We took all first, second and third places!"

"......the winner, runner-up and third place are all contestants, not me."

"Of course Kitayama-san, Akechi-san, and Takigawa-san were also amazing! Everyone did so well!"

At the Student Council President's broad smile, the 1st Year women's Speed Shooting team bowed in unison with a happy 'thank you'.

"But at the same time, your own achievements are no less. They were without a doubt spectacular."

Although without Mayumi's sheer energy, Mari also joined in the praise with a good natured face.

"Uh, thank you very much."

"It's not like this is a contest. As the engineer who significantly contributed to our contestants' monopoly of all the placings, you should have your share of the recognition."

At Mari's words, Shizuku and the others nodded deeply.

"I couldn't believe it myself."

"My magic suddenly became so good, it was like an illusion."

Unlike Shizuku, the other two added their own comments.

Shizuku simply nodded as if everything was a matter of course.

"Especially concerning the magic Kitayama-san used, there has been an approach from the Universities to officially adopt it into the 'Index'."

However, at Suzune's words Mayumi's eyes widened, Mari was lost for words and Shizuku stiffened.

The official name of the Index is the 'National Magic University Compiled・ Magic Encyclopedia・ Index of True Names'.

For a magic to have its proper name recorded in the encyclopedia the National Magic Universities are creating, in this context, means the magic would not be considered a subset of any existing magic, but officially recognized by the Universities as an entirely new branch of magic.

To researchers engaged in the development of magic in Japan, this was the one single honor they all strove for.

However—

"I see. Then, please submit Kitayama-san as the developer's name."

"What!? No way!"

At Tatsuya's utter lack of interest, Shizuku drew close in a hurry.

"That was Tatsuya-san's original magic!"

"......It's normal for the developer name of a new magic to be registered as the name of the first user is it not?"

Distancing himself from Shizuku's pleas, Tatsuya replied with no tension.

"Hm......excessive humility is also unpleasant you know?"

At Mari's chiding, accompanied by a slightly chilling glance, Tatsuya simply shook his head reluctantly.

"It's not humility."

"Then what is it?"

"I just don't want the shame of having my name registered as the developer of a magic I can't even use."

Certainly, if one is known as the developer of a new type of magic, they are often asked for demonstrations.

If one is 'unable to use' a magic they developed themselves, suspicions would arise that maybe the magic was actually developed by others.

Tatsuya's reason was not unjustifiable, but......

"......Just how then did you manage to confirm the operative readiness of a magic you can't use?"

Building up a magic by theory alone is surpassingly non-standard but, even if it were possible, to let another use a magic that was not tested and verified as functional was the work of a mad scientist who ignored all the risks, and it was extremely immoral.

"It's not like I can't use it at all. It's just that it would take me far too much time to set up, to the point it's not really at the level you could say I can truly 'use' it."

"Well well, Mari, Tatsuya-kun, let's not quarrel over such a thing now."

Seeing Mari preparing more ammunition to throw at Tatsuya's comeback, Mayumi intervened between the two.

"We're finally back to a good start. Tatsuya-kun, please help the other competitors just as much."

As Mayumi tapped his shoulder with a smile, Tatsuya gave a modest bow.

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The performance of First High School's women's Speed Shooting team had created a stir in the other schools.

There was an enthusiastic feeling of 'we can win this year' throughout the Nine Schools Tournament, especially Third High School, who thought of the accident in the women's Battle Board 'we feel bad for them, but this is a chance!' — While such thoughts may seem excessive, they were shared amongst the others.

"So Masaki, First High's performance, you don't think it was due to the personal skill of those girls themselves?"

Of the twenty people gathered — all the 1st Years of the Third High School Newcomer's Battle contestants —

"It has to be said, the magical power of the winner, that Kitayama girl, is astounding. I'm sure she would have won either way. But the other two, I don't feel were anything special. If the results had been decided by magical power alone, I'm sure they wouldn't have gone so far as to claim second and third place as well."

"Not to mention that the advantage in Battle Board lies with us this year, seeing how I think First High only has one 1st Year in it with a particularly high level."

The results of the Battle Board so far had seen the two guys from Third High School both qualify, and of the two girls they sent forth one had qualified. By contrast only one of the men from the three First High School sent qualified, and the one girl they sent qualified too.

"It's as George says. We don't lose out in terms of the quality of our contestants. If that's so, there must be some other factor."

"Ichijou-kun, Kichijouji-kun......what do you think it is?"

At the question from the girl who had lost to First High in the semifinals of the Speed Shooting, both Ichijou and Kichijouji made eye contact, confirming their suspicions.

"It's probably, their engineer."

Kichijouji responded out loud.

"The engineer for their women's Speed Shooting team is probably quite the ace."

"I concur. George, the device that winner girl used......did you notice?"

"Yeah......that was a general purpose wasn't it."

Kichijouji's answer, aside from the two of them, made a considerable impact on the other Third High 1st Years.

"No way......I mean, it had auxiliary sights attached right?"

"That's right! I've never heard of a general purpose device shaped like a rifle either!"

"That's true. Whichever maker's catalogue you look through, you'd never find anything like that would you?"

At the objections being raised, Ichijou remained somber.

"......certainly, something like that has never commercially appeared. However, examples of general devices with integrated sighting aids do indeed exist."

"You gotta be kidding......"

At Ichijou's words, stunned voices floated through the air.

In fact a strong air of disbelief permeated throughout, until Kichijouji came out with his own support.

"It's new technology, only just announced in Dusseldorf last summer."

"Just last summer!? That's freakin' state of the art!"

"Yeah, I didn't know either until I looked into it for this thing."

"Not even Ichijou knew, there's no way we would......"

An uncomfortable silence followed. Surprise, anxiety, doubt......and awe.

"......Kichijouji-kun sure knows a lot though. As expected of our brain."

The words of that female competitor were intended to loosen up the heavy atmosphere.

But Kichijouji remained unmoved.

"Sure......but, the prototype unveiled in Dusseldorf was not meant to be a practical model. The operation was sluggish, accuracy was low — from a technical standpoint it was simply an experiment that had been cast aside."

Kichijouji knotted his brow as he replied, his voice bitter.

"The device the winner First High's Kitayama-san used however fully combined the strengths of the speed and accuracy of a specialized type with the versatility of a general type. If that was all the work of one engineer......that's not the level of a high school student anymore. It's almost monstrous."

"Masaki, for you to describe someone that far......"

"It's physically impossible for a single engineer to be responsible for every competitor though......"

"Competitions that guy is responsible for in the future are likely to be beastly. It's very likely our devices will be handicapped by at least two or three generations."

At Kichijouji's ominous speculation, silence reigned amongst the gathered teammates.

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Tatsuya, who was at this moment receiving such unjust treatment from the athletes in their rival schools without any knowledge (obviously) after finishing a late lunch proceeded to the girls' Battle Board course.

Planned for the afternoon were the fourth to sixth races.

Honoka would appear in the sixth. If he only needed to keep his appointment with her, there should be no need to come so early.

"Ah, Shiba-kun, what's the matter?"

At the sight of him accompanied by Miyuki and Shizuku, Azusa tilted her head. Her posture was so similar to a squirrel holding a nut that despite his melancholic mood, he couldn't help but twitch a smile.

At his careless chuckle he consciously tried to tighten his lips, but there wasn't enough tension. In resignation, he relaxed.

"......You were making fun of me just now weren't you?"

"Not at all. I was just impressed by Nakajou-senpai's diligence."

"......You really are making fun of me aren't you?"

Being glared at with those half-lidded eyes so much like a child sulking forced Tatsuya to look away to hold back his laughter.

"......It's fine, I don't care."

Azusa kept glaring at him for a while, then with a sigh, muttered to herself.

This was probably something she went through every day.

Somehow, her figure also exuded an air of melancholy.

Leaving her like that would make one feel terrible.

"—I really wasn't making fun of you."

"......Really?"

"Really."

"Really really?"

"Really."

Being looked at with suspicion — due to the height difference, straight up — by Azusa, Tatsuya showed a strong front.

Seeing that proud bearing, Azusa finally seemed to relent (was she fooled?) and smiled.

"Alright. Because I believe in Tatsuya-kun."

Saying so as she laughed at him, she drifted over to his side.

Tatsuya knew without even looking.

The image of Miyuki's eyebrows rising floated into his mind.

(Ooh boy......)

It seemed his sister would be in a pretty bad mood tonight as well, he sighed to himself — although he couldn't resent her for it, it did pain him a little inside.

—That aside.

"So, what's the matter? There's still two more hours before Mitsui-san's match."

"I felt rather uncomfortable outside, so I came here for some shelter."

As Azusa tilted her head again, next to Tatsuya, Miyuki laughed.

"......Onii-sama is too concerned."

At those questioning eyes, Miyuki's tone suggested 'it can't be helped'.

"They've become very motivated, so I'm sure the end result will be just fine."

On his other side, Shizuku reassured him.

"Ah, ahhh, is that what it is......"

Guessing the circumstances immediately, Azusa was pretty sharp too.

The monopoly of Shizuku and the others had been the subject of praise even throughout lunch.

Not just the executives, but the seniors who had the day off and had been watching that day went to compliment the three, yet the number of people who also went on to mention Tatsuya's achievements were not inconsiderable.

At that, the men's Speed Shooting team had begun burning with an extraordinary rivalry.

That in itself, as Shizuku said, was not undesirable.

If they become fired up and increase their desire for victory, as long as they aren't idle, it works as a plus.

However, being stared at with eyes that seemed to burn with vengeance for their dead father, made you want to tell them to get a life.

Of course, to say such a thing out loud would lead to a fight. In order to avoid unnecessary trouble, he had come to the competition venue as early as possible.

The location of the Nine Schools Tournament was the southeast area of the Fuji Armed Forces Training Grounds. While it's called an area, the Fuji training grounds were huge to begin with, and simply moving between venues would end up being a considerable hike. Without that much land, it would be impossible to prepare for areas such as the Battle Board course and the Monolith Code battlefield.

The Battle Board course was a winding flume circuit of approximately three kilometers.

With two sets for the two genders, as well as the spectator stands meant that quite a bit of land was needed just to make this course.

When considering moving around the venue, the Battle Board course had been constructed right at the edge of the area provided for the Nine Schools Tournament in order to avoid having to bypass that large course on the way to other venues, and it can safely be said that there were no competitors from other events around such as those participating in the concurrent men's Speed Shooting.

"I could also have gone back to the dorm, but I decided since I'll be coming here anyway I might as well see if there's anything I could help with."

"Really!?"

It wasn't just Azusa who raised a cry.

Perhaps overhearing from somewhere, Honoka suddenly came flying out from the competitor's area.

"Then please, by all means! Have a look at my CAD!"

Recently, under the influence of Tatsuya, Honoka had also began calling her device not 'Assistance' but 'CAD'. At Honoka's momentous leap Tatsuya had almost laughed out loud again. Tightening his face against the impulse, he scolded Honoka.

"Hey, come on Honoka. That way of speaking is kinda rude to Nakajou-senpai you know?"

Honoka's attitude, and her words just now, couldn't help but be taken as some level of dissatisfaction at Azusa's work.

"Eh, ah, I'm very sorry!"

Honoka lowered her head in a hurry.

"Don't worry about it. I know you didn't mean it in that way."

Azusa shook her head with a dry smile.

Her tone was almost sisterly.

Resisting his urge to laugh this time was a difficult task.

The average time for a Battle Board round was about 15 minutes.

However, the loading and unloading of the boards as well as the inspection of the waterway, as well as the repair of areas damaged by magic meant more time was needed to prepare for each race.

Allowing for that, as well as extra time to give leeway, meant the competition schedule for Battle Board had been organized into blocks of one hour.

The final race would begin at 3:30 in the afternoon. Already, players were moving to the starting positions. The too long wait time was not good for tense nerves, and there were many instances of competitors ending up being unable to utilize their full strength (every year, such examples would occur for both genders in both the 'real' finals and the Newcomers division), but possibly because of the chatter Honoka had shared with Miyuki and Shizuku before the match, she seemed in great condition as she stood poised upon her board.

The sight of Honoka constantly sticking to Tatsuya had gradually stirred up Miyuki's mood, but instead of separating them she had gone along and entered into their chat, the result of which seemed to have been a positive diversion for Honoka.

The heavy swim shoes and thick wet suit that covered the wrists and ankles were meant to protect the competitor's body from the friction of impacts and falling. But the pressurized uniform stuck fast to the wearer, and sharply emphasized the curves of the body even more (?) than usual.

Over the thigh, in large letters, was the logo 'ICHIKO'. With her stimulating proportions unbefitting a 1st Year highlighted by her colorful wet suit, Honoka crouched with one knee upon the board awaiting the start.

The CAD over her forearm was thinner and wider than usual, increasing its area and allowing for larger buttons. As he had said earlier, Tatsuya did not tamper with Honoka's CAD.

After looking over the system, he found nothing which absolutely needed work.

Being asked for advice by both Honoka and Azusa, he had just one thing to offer.

The dark goggles that Honoka now wore had been brought by him.

To be sure, the midsummer sunshine was inclining in from the west to the extent that facing that way directly would be uncomfortably dazzling.

Due to water splashing on the glass and blocking their view, however, few competitors opted to use goggles or sunglasses.

Azusa had felt that narrowing the field of view would only be a disadvantage, but Honoka had taken the goggles without hesitation.

"......come to think of it, why has Mitsui-san prepared so many optical Activation Sequences?"

It's rare for an engineer to issue Activation Sequences.

With the exception of Tatsuya, who plans out the Activation Sequence lineup himself, normally engineers install Sequences based on the wish of the competitors.

Azusa had known too that Honoka was adept with illusionary magic of the light wave system from her profile, but due to the nature of the competition, Azusa had honestly believed there was no place for illusionary magic.

"The rules of Battle Board state that interfering with other players via magic is prohibited. However, interfering with the water and thus indirectly interfering with other players is not."

"......what does that mean?"

Despite being asked repeatedly by Azusa, Tatsuya had only returned an evil smile.

The signal for the start of the sixth qualifying race of the Newcomer's women's Battle Board came on.

Immediately after.

The audience in near unison turned away from the waterway. As if lit up by a flash, the water surface poured out light.

One competitor fell overboard.

The others had their balance disrupted whilst in the midst of accelerating, and one lone figure dashed to the front.

As if expecting the situation — although it has to be said that she was the one who created the situation — wearing dark goggles, that lone figure was Honoka.

"Alright."

Looking up at Tatsuya, who gave a voice of affirmation, Azusa's face was full of amazement.

"......Was this Onii-sama's strategy?"

Miyuki's voice as she removed her sunglasses was also filled with wonder. (By the way the sunglasses the three of them wore had been issued beforehand. Miyuki and the others had been mystified as to their purpose, but put them on anyway.)

"To be sure, it's not prohibited by the rules but......"

Shizuku's voice had a hint of reproach in it.

One couldn't help feeling that this was rather against the spirit of fair play.

However the yellow flag which would indicate any significant unfair play remained unwaved, and the match continued. The red flag that signaled a player's disqualification for rules violations likewise remained unused.

It meant that the tournament committee deemed Honoka's magic, and Tatsuya's strategy, a legal move.

"......Performing optical magic on the water's surface, I didn't expect that at all."

Her personality straightforward at all times, Azusa muttered in admiration.

"Interfering with the water surface, whether to generate waves or vortexes, affects the consciousness and orientation of other competitors yet it is allowed since it complies with the rule that 'you may affect another competitor via magically targeting the water surface'. Doing something like freezing the water solid or boiling it would certainly be too dangerous, but I did find it strange that no one until now had used it to cause dizziness."

If one is suddenly blinded without any warning, it takes a while to restore vision.

Meandering slowly along the course, unable to sprint due to their obscured vision, the difference between Honoka and the other players was already decisive.

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"......It's in the bag."

"......Who thought of this strategy?"

Mayumi who was watching through the monitor did not experience any discomfort as the monitor automatically adjusted the amount of light displayed, yet now while she was calmly assessing the originality of that tactic she remembered her initial surprise (although calm surprise is a bit of an oxymoron).

Following behind Mari's mutter and Mayumi's question, Suzune answered.

"It was Shiba-kun."

"Eh, but I thought Tatsuya-kun wasn't involved in this match?"

Hearing that answer, Mayumi tilted her head as if going 'huh?'

Suzune's reply was possibly a bit too polite.

"The one who submitted the plan in the first place was Mitsui-san. But the one who decided the Activation Sequence lineup and brushed up the finer details of the strategy was Shiba-kun, or so I'm told."

Suzune's deliberate mention of him 'deciding the Activation Sequence lineup' was because of the perception that doing so was the exception, not the rule.

"......it really is one thing after another with him, isn't it."

A touch of reproach could be heard in Mari's voice.

"What's the matter? You seem somewhat dissatisfied."

Mari didn't answer Mayumi's question.

However, her silence itself spoke volumes on what was on her mind,

"......Planning is very important. As the masters say."

From what Mayumi could tell, Mari was cranky at being shown a tactic she hadn't thought of. For Mari who prided herself on being a strategist, it decidedly wasn't very fun.

"It's a tactic no one has thought of for nine years, so this is the point where you should be nice and impressed."

".....I am impressed. That's why I'm so annoyed."

Being cut into by Suzune, reluctantly, Mari admitted her jealousy.

Mari was magnanimous enough to accept it, so Suzune let her off for now.

"Still, this is a one-off strategy isn't it? I wonder what he'll do for the finals?"

Mari didn't come up with a follow through, so Mayumi responded instead.

"No worries. There's no way that man hasn't thought that far ahead."

"That's true. This is also just a strategic move for the next match."

Seems like it was a needless anxiety.

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"Yeah......seems like I've done something bad to Honoka."

Watching Honoka take the lead from her earlier move, and maintain it all the way until the finish, Tatsuya muttered in a bitter voice. Next to him, Miyuki looked up at her brother's clouded face.

"......What's the matter?"

Their appearance was noticed by others, and Azusa spoke up to Tatsuya.

"Ah, nothing......"

His answer was evasive, or in other words an excuse.

Still, he didn't become silent.

"She could have won this race easily based on her speed alone......there was no need for the confusion."

"Well......even so, she did take the lead thanks to her initial dazzle, so couldn't you still call it a successful strategy?"

Azusa, not knowing the nature of Tatsuya's regret, tilted her head.

"When you stand out so much, it's going to mean you'll be marked by the other contestants......"

"The semis are a race between three people......it's a possibility that in the next match, the other two will pair up."

Miyuki complemented Tatsuya's words.

Finally, Azusa understood what they were worried about.

"Oh, is that what it was."

And laughed at their concerns.

"Something like that......I'm pretty sure it'd be a disadvantage right?"

At Miyuki's countering hesitance, Azusa merely shook her head happily.

"That won't happen, since we've been marked from the start."

"Haahh......"

She had said it so cheerfully that for a moment Tatsuya wondered if she was actually proud of that.

—Well, just for a moment.

However insensitive he was, he wasn't so far gone as to not realize she was just comforting them.

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"I won! I won, Tatsuya-san!"

As soon as she rose from the waterway, Honoka immediately hurried over to where Tatsuya and the others were without even changing from her wetsuit, hopping all the way.

"Ah, yeah. We saw. Well done."

Aware of the other staff who had come down to greet their teammates, Tatsuya hastily put both hands out in front of him while congratulating her in an attempt to calm her down.

But it had the opposite effect.

"Thank you so much!"

Perhaps misunderstanding, Honoka clasped the hands Tatsuya held out and stared up at his face, tears of joy threatening to spill out from her eyes. Even Miyuki didn't expect her to show her emotions so straightforwardly.

While Tatsuya stood frozen from a lack of experience with such things, Honoka really did start to cry.

"Whenever it comes to competitions, I become so weak......I hardly ever win competitions in athletic meets or tournaments like these."

It was the first time he heard of this. If that were true, then maybe using the strategy in the Newcomer's division wasn't such a miscalculation after all.

But as Tatsuya stood helplessly looking left and right, behind Honoka the figure of Shizuku waving her hands flew into view.

From her appearance, it seemed she was saying 'that's not the case, not at all.'

With his hands still firmly grasped by Honoka, and establishing line of sight with Shizuku, she began to mouth words to him. Her lip movements read 'she's・ talking・ about・ during・ primary・ school'.

(A story from their primary school days, huh......)

Tatsuya sighed whilst looking towards heaven.

She probably didn't intend to lie or anything......but her conviction was just a little too intense.

Despite the icicle glare Miyuki directed at him (that is to say icy cold, and very sharp), he still required some time to regain his composure.

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Both in athletics and on the board, if one does not have the will then victory will be uncertain.

It's the same with magic competitions.

Looking at the success of one's teammates and thinking 'now it's my turn' is a system which raises the willpower of the team, and is like a magic bullet which boosts morale.

'Willpower' is linked with 'fighting spirit', but 'fighting spirit' also easily links to 'futility'.

Before the girls' eyes, such an event was occurring.

"Morisaki-kun was the runner-up, but......"

Mayumi's words were wrapped in disappointment.

"The other two missed the cut huh......"

Mari's words continued the disappointed trend.

At the close of the first day of the Newcomer's Division, in the meeting room, the 3rd Year executives stood before the results of the men's Speed Shooting rankings and let out a collective sigh.

"The results of the men's and women's are reversed......"

"I wouldn't say that. Third High took first and fourth place, so the girls still give us a positive balance.

You're being just a little too pessimistic."

Suzune's sober analysis countered Mayumi's gloomy remarks. It was all in an effort to dispel the stagnant mood.

"......Right. As Ichihara said, it's not good to be too negative. In the first place, the results of those girls are far more than we could have expected. We must be positive about the lead they have given us today.

"But the slump with the guys isn't just in 'quickdraw'. In 'surfing' as well, only one guy qualified compared to two girls."

At Mari's remarks, in a tone as if reminding herself, Katsuto agreed with a grim look. (By the way 'quickdraw' is a nickname for Speed Shooting, as 'surfing' is for Battle Board.)

"If their poor performance continues like this, even if we do well this year it's possible we'll be disadvantaged in the years to come."

"That losing would become a habit?"

"It is a possibility."

At Katsuto's point, both Mari and Mayumi bitterly fell silent.

Being leaders of a Magic High School, especially the executives of First High who prided themselves upon victory, they were unable to live with the easy thought 'we did good enough this year'.

"The mens' side may require some support."

"Still Juumonji, even if you say support what can we do at this late hour?"

Mari's rebuttal to Katsuto's murmur was bitter.

It was certainly a 'late hour'.

The Newcomer's Division had already begun. It wasn't possible to change the staff or competitors anymore.

Even when she glanced at him, Katsuto had no reply.

That atmosphere however, rather than being at a loss, gave the impression not of mere silence but that a plan was forming.

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At last tomorrow, or rather 'today' already, was Miyuki's turn.

There had been no move from the organized crime related sabotage warned of by Kazama since the incident involving Mari, but Tatsuya couldn't put it out of his mind.

If his hypotheses were correct, the 'enemy' had tampered with the CADs just prior to the competition. It was a low possibility for more sabotage to be carried out overnight, but it never hurt to double check.

For the enemy's actions to be immediately undetectable by him, they held very high skill.

Finishing the final adjustments, he systematically tightly locked the CAD, then further added a triple lock before finally stopping work.

There isn't a trace of any other person.

Not just humans, but no other life signs could be detected at all.

In regards to the enemy, it would be expected that security here is much higher.

Kazama and his subordinates, the elites of the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion were secretly helping behind the scenes, so even if there was an attempt, a direct attack was unlikely to succeed.

Without wandering around unnecessarily, he proceeded through the entrance of the hotel (of course, requiring bio-metric identification), and went straight to his room.

Before he entered, he noticed at the door.

His only roommates were non-breathing machines.

At this time of night, when he was confident the minute hand of the clock should be announcing a date change any time now, there shouldn't be any sign of life aside from him in the hallway — but he turned the key and walked inside regardless.

"Hey now, just what time do you think it is?"

Unlike usual, his slightly stern voice seized the initiative.

Unlike usual, his posture suggested this wasn't something that could be let off with a smile.

Unlike usual, the one on the receiving end of all this must have realized that as well.

Her shoulders trembling, Miyuki hastily got up off the bed she had been sitting on, and fearfully looked up at her brother.

"A lack of sleep will reduce your ability to concentrate. Even if it's you, where careless mistakes may not necessarily lead to defeat, that won't always be the case."

"I'm very sorry!"

Being scolded by Tatsuya in earnest, Miyuki bowed deeply in a voice verging on tears. Hearing his sister like this, seeing her like this, Tatsuya was simply unable to keep up his tough stance for any longer.

"......It's good you understand. Now come on, let's go back to your room. I'll escort you there."

Perhaps his voice was a little too forceful, as when Miyuki timidly looked up, she refused to look at her brother's face.

"Miyuki?"

"......Onii-sama, for a bit, just a bit, could I have a little of your time?"

"......Just a little."

A competition in obstinacy would be a waste of time.

Tatsuya knew from prior experience that his sister was rather passively aggressive in this way.

"I heard from Shizuku. Onii-sama, you turned down the honor of having your name added to the 'Index'."

"Not formally at least."

"Rather than formally or anything, you were prohibited weren't you?"

"Yeah."

At Tatsuya's brief affirmation, Miyuki, as if struggling with something, stood whilst biting her lip a while.

"......Was that, upon the orders of our Aunt?"

"Yeah."

Another brief affirmation.

Miyuki, once again teary eyed, looked down.

"The investigative powers of the Magic Universities are very high. The gossip sites masquerading as news sites of normal media organizations can't even begin to come close. They're almost comparable to military or intelligence agencies.

Developers of new magic in addition to being given access to the resources of the Universities are also granted various privileges, but their identity is also examined in detail. It's in order to root out national spies and terrorists. It's an investigation on a totally different level to high school admission. It's not unlikely they'll discover not only my identity as 'Silver', but 'Shiba Tatsuya's' identity as a Yotsuba which the Yotsuba themselves have been blocking so carefully."

Faced with his sister's tears, Tatsuya explained in a slightly cool voice.

It was not only because he had to be uncompromising in the face of her tears, but because he had to convince himself.

"......"

For a while, her head bowed, Miyuki said nothing.

Tatsuya felt relief at not hearing her sob anymore.

"To be sure, just entering the Nine Schools Competition carried some risk of my identity coming under scrutiny. However, leaving my name in the

Magic Encyclopedia is far different from being in a high school competition. The 'Guardian' of the Yotsuba exists as a shadow. Do you think for such an outcast to be in the limelight would be acceptable to our Aunt?"

Miyuki kept silent. She didn't even mouth any words of comfort.

That was her answer to his question.

"For now, I still don't have enough power. In a head on situation, there is a possibility I could defeat the 'Queen of Night' Yotsuba Maya. My 'Decomposition' has good compatibility as a counter to her 'Night' after all.

But the me as of now, even if I could beat our Aunt, I can't do anything about the Yotsuba. Force of arms alone, the threat of violence alone is not enough. If I displace our Aunt, another worse manipulator would simply show up in her place. At this moment, I can only follow."

Those words weren't so much to convince his sister, as for himself.

As he tried to satisfy himself that way,

Miyuki, moving from the front,

embraced him.

Her face shining with tears buried itself into his chest.

Such an appearance might be better described as 'clinging', yet that was somehow inappropriate.

"......I'm on your side."

"Miyuki......"

"I will always no matter what, come what may, be on your side.

That time will definitely come. Without a doubt, it will come.

Until then, and forever after, I will always be on Onii-sama's side."

"......"

The hands of the clock accused them of far exceeding the realms of 'just a little'.

But let's go along with her 'just a little more'...... Tatsuya thought as he gently wrapped his arms around Miyuki's back.

Chapter 9

It was the fifth day of the Nine Schools Competition and the second morning of the Newcomers Division.

Tatsuya arrived in front of the arena that was busy preparing for the Newcomers Division's Icicle Destruction.

Several large cranes were unloading 1 meter x 1 meter x 2 meter icicles from large battlefield vehicles specially modified for this purpose. Seeing this would naturally cause people to believe that the days where super robot anime became reality were not too far off.

"......If we could completely ignore energy efficiency, that is."

"Onii-sama? What are you talking about?"

As if to reject this outrageous line of thinking, Tatsuya involuntarily started muttering to himself.

"No, it's nothing."

She did not pursue this vague answer.

"Let's go quickly."

"Yes."

Originally, this was only a stopping point along their route to the competition location.

Tatsuya urged Miyuki onward towards the resting area located on the top floor of the Arrow Tower.

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There was still 30 minutes until the start of the first round in the morning.

When Tatsuya entered the arena, there was still plenty of spare time.

"Good morning!"

......Still, the players for the first round were already there.

"Good morning...... Sorry for making you wait so long."

"Oh please, I was the one who came too early."

The player for the first round of Icicle Destruction, Akechi Eimi, smiled as she shook her head and swept a lock of her ruby red hair back from her face.

"Good morning, Eimi. How early did you get up?"

"Good morning, Miyuki. For some reason, I woke up before the alarm went off. It's like I haven't recovered from yesterday's excitement."

Her other name was Emilia Goldie. Her full name was Akechi Emilia Goldie Eimi. Eimi was a quarter British stock. Her nickname "Emmy", rather than originating from her Japanese name "Eimi", probably came from her British name "Emilia".

A Magician's ability was heavily influenced by genetics.

Due to the connection between magic and national power, each country jealously guarded its magic bloodlines and either officially or unofficially forbade international marriages between Magicians. (This country that superficially allowed freedom of marriage belonged in the "unofficial" category.)

Yet, in the generation of Tatsuya's grandparents, allied countries actively encouraged international marriages between Magicians. The goal was to "cross" "excellent stock" to "develop" superior Magicians.

The ensuing result was that over half of the current students at magic high schools boasted bloodlines from Western Europe or India.

Leo was one of them, and the female student known as Akechi Eimi was another.

As could be inferred from her words, she also appeared in yesterday's Speed Shooting competition. This was the second day in a row she was working alongside Tatsuya. Besides Miyuki and the two others, Eimi was the first one on the Women's Team to jell with Tatsuya. For Tatsuya, she was also the most relaxed young lady on the team.

After the two of them exchanged greetings, they delved into girl talk as Tatsuya smoothly removed the CAD from the case he was carrying, performed a cursory examination, and handed it to Eimi.

This was a clumsy looking, shotgun-shaped Specialized CAD that measured 50 cm in length and completely dwarfed a young lady's hand.

The weapon looked quite heavy, but because recoil wasn't an issue, the weight was significantly lower than a normal firearm thanks to its lightweight materials. Yet Eimi's movements were like something straight out of a Western as she swung the gun around and took aim out the window.

"......Eimi, you're not British, but American, aren't you?"

"How many times do I have to say this, no. Now even Miyuki is saying this too? My grandmother's family was knighted by the Tudors themselves."

Contrary to the content of her words, her tone remained unperturbed.

She maintained her current posture and started to supply the CAD with psions. Somewhere along the way, the safety was removed. Just like Morisaki's Quick Draw, this was an entirely different type of pristine CAD drawing.

"How is it?"

"Hm...... Now I know how Shizuku feels."

Everyone in the 1st Year Women's Team knew about the fact that the Ojou-sama from the wealthy Kitayama Family wanted to "reserve" Tatsuya.

"Are there any problems?"

"Yep, it's perfect!"

Eimi relaxed her posture and smiled in delight.

Apart from her ruby hair and moss green pupils, her outward appearance was thoroughly Japanese. Even among her peers, she was the one who had the most childish impression. Rather than calling her earlier smile "delightful", a more innocent "teehee" was probably closer to the mark.

"I have no idea what you're talking about......"

Eimi tilted her head at Tatsuya's muttering, but her smile didn't fade in the slightest. One of the chief reasons was likely because she had no idea what he was talking about.

"At least let me run a few calibrations. Can you put on the ear set?"

"Eh? Why?"

"Eimi...... In truth, you didn't get up early, but didn't sleep at all, right?"

At being asked this sudden question, Eimi's smile grew a tad forced.

"......How could you tell?"

Seeing Eimi's widened eyes, Tatsuya silently nodded and, in response, took the CAD from her hands and restarted the calibration process.

"......You're sharper than my parents."

Eimi obediently put on the headphones used for measurement while nagging with an "I can't believe you" and placing her hands on the measuring pads.

Seeing the numbers scrolling down the screen, Tatsuya's expression darkened.

With Tatsuya's minute facial changes, Eimi's body also started to curl up. This scene didn't escape Miyuki's eyes.

"Well, Onii-sama?"

There was no reprimand hidden in her words, but when Tatsuya heard her words, he raised his head in realization and smiled as he rubbed the space between his brows with two fingers.

"Unless Eimi also forgoes Sound Sleep?"

"Also? You mean Shiba-kun does that too?"

Eimi's reaction prompted Tatsuya's expression to soften somewhat as he nodded.

"Wow, I discovered a comrade. How should I put this, doesn't that give you an uncomfortable feeling? Especially those weird sound waves."

"There's no actual health risk...... But I do agree that it is quite uncomfortable. I do make an exception for sleepless nights though. Especially if I have a competition the next day."

"OK~."

Eimi's response was perfect for a child that had just been scolded by a parent. Tatsuya could only smile wryly at this.

"Then, I'll raise the feedback loop a little higher...... This might be a little irritating, so bear with it for a little bit. Certainly you wouldn't want to be accused of 'losing the contest owing to lack of sleep', right?"

"I'll bear with it, please! If that really happened, they'll never let me live this down."

There was nothing worthy of note in her tone. Eimi blushed as she pressed her hands against several interesting points on her pants. Tatsuya paused and was frozen for a solid second.

"I really didn't want to bring this up, but, Miyuki...... What do you people do in your rooms?"

"N, nothing, Onii-sama, Miyuki hasn't done anything shameful!"

"Oh, really~? Miyuki's room is a complete safe house."

"Eimi! Do not speak of such strange nonsense in front of Onii-sama!"

An awkward silence covered the resting area. To break this stalemate, an abrupt change in the conversation was inevitable. He wasn't entirely sure who this excuse was directed to, Tatsuya thought to himself.

"......Fortunately, the first round is in the early morning so you can take a nap before the second round begins. Sorry, Miyuki, but could I trouble you to prepare the 'Sleeping Dock' for immediate use?"

"I understand. I will be right back."

After Miyuki departed to setup the sensory inhibitory dock (soundproof, shockproof, light-shielded, sealed single bed), Tatsuya started CAD calibration.

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Although the first round got a little tense at one point, victory was finally achieved with three icicles still left in allied territory.

Speaking of which, the ending result was that Eimi was currently deep in dream land without any opportunity to complain that "It's too dark~" or "It's too cramped~".

This was the fifth event, which was the second event for the female students from First High. They were currently in the resting area before the match began.

(I seem to recall saying something very similar recently.)

Tatsuya thought of this, but was still forced to say it aloud.

"Shizuku...... Are you really wearing that uniform during the competition?"

"Yeah?"

When Shizuku replied with an "Is something wrong?" expression on her face, Tatsuya really wanted to cover his head and was completely at a loss.

Icicle Destruction involved the players standing on four meter tall platforms and defending the 12 icicles in their own territory that measured 12 square meters while simultaneously knocking down or destroying all their opponent's 12 icicles.

The players were strictly using long range magic, so there was no need to move their physical bodies.

In other words, the player's wardrobe played no role in this event. (Besides the uniforms that hinder the grip on their CADs.)

The only criterion for wardrobe was that it "must be decent".

And the ensuing result was that — while unintentional — at some point Women's Icicle Destruction became a fashion show.

In addition, when Kanon appeared for the Official Division on the second and third days, she was wearing a fairly normal sports uniform. She wore tights, a mini jacket, an adequate shirt, as well as long socks and tennis shoes.

On the other hand, Eimi was dressed like a jockey, complete with a white collared shirt, red riding jacket on the upper body, tight women's pants and black riding boots below, along with a black duck-billed hat.

Still, those still fell within normal boundaries and didn't qualify as anything particularly gaudy.

Then, there was Shizuku......

"Uh, Shizuku......"

"Yes?"

"Wouldn't the tamoto...... Get in the way?"

Yes.

No need to flog the dead horse, but that was a "tamoto" from a kimono.

"There's no problem. The sleeves are short enough, and I also have the obi."

Speaking of which, Shizuku deftly tied the obi in front of Tatsuya.

Such a fluid motion clearly showed that she had plentiful experience in a kimono.

Yet—

(If you needed to use the obi to keep the tamoto in check, wouldn't you be better off forgoing the kimono in the first place?)

Tatsuya thought of this, but managed to hold his retort in.

There wasn't much time before the next round, so Tatsuya quickly gave up on persuading her otherwise — after all, this was the "official garb" for boosting one's spirits. In that case, he'll just have to turn a blind eye.

Shizuku chose — correction, the CAD that Tatsuya chose for her was a Generalized CAD.

This implied that the event demanded a careful energy allocation that possessed a balanced strategy.

It wasn't like Tatsuya could keep pulling rabbits out of a hat. To be precise, Tatsuya himself had no interest in creating devious tactics.

For him, it was all about providing the players with the most appropriate tools and the strategy that could bring about their maximum potential, and nothing more. In light of this, if direct assault was the most effective strategy, he would ruthlessly adopt that as his course of action.

Just like this match.

The moment Shizuku appeared on the platform, the audience raised a clamor likely due to her outfit.

However, the person in question was steady even if a light breeze had grazed her face as she lifted her left arm before her chest, the tamoto held firmly in place by the obi.

Shizuku's CAD was just like the one she normally used, with the command console facing the inside of her arm.

In the recent age, most female Magicians used CADs with command consoles facing towards the outside. Despite the height of fashion, Shizuku still preferred to use the feminine inward facing console, which befitted her status as an Ojou-sama. Still, given her usual taciturn and emotionless nature as well as the occasional merciless snarking, this honestly gave people an incompatible feeling.

If voiced aloud in front of aforementioned young lady, this would undoubtedly end with a beating. Tatsuya adjusted the focal point on the monitoring device and set these thoughts aside.

In the following time period,

Shizuku's mission was to focus entirely on this match.

Tatsuya's mission was to gather his attention entirely on her.

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"Miyuki...... Aren't you going where Tatsuya-kun is?"

Honoka piped up from beside her. At this time, Miyuki was sitting in a different section of the stands reserved for players and auxiliaries that was not part of the normal audience stands and was patiently waiting for the match to begin.

Just as she did during Eimi's match in the first round, the moment Tatsuya entered the monitoring room, Miyuki split apart from him.

It was perfectly natural for players from the same school to cheer on their teammates from the monitoring room, but—

"Icicle Destruction is a solo performance. Sooner or later, Shizuku and I will meet on the field, so wouldn't it be unfair for me to sneak a peek at her trump card?"

In terms of trump cards, there were certainly opportunities during practice to see them. Even First High wasn't extravagant enough to prepare several large scale practice facilities for the Nine Schools Competition.

So, what Miyuki was actually referring to was something else.

They were fated to be opponents. Miyuki didn't want to see Tatsuya, who was serving as their mutual technician, worry needlessly about such trivialities. This was probably Miyuki's real concern.

At the same time, she didn't want Shizuku to be distracted by her presence.

Honoka and Shizuku were close friends and rivals since elementary school. Until middle school, Honoka saw Shizuku as her strongest opponent and conversely, Shizuku also saw Honoka as her most formidable opponent.

In their cohort and circle of friends, no one could match them in terms of magical talent.

Upon entering high school and receiving official magic training, both Honoka and Shizuku yearned to meet someone — other than each other — who could push them to their limits. Yet, somewhere in the depths of their hearts, a stubborn belief that could not be eradicated told them that they would never meet someone who mirrored their talents.

In the same school, in the same tutoring class, there were no children from the Ten Master Clans, but several children from the "Numbers System". Still, none of them was worthy of being a new rival.

However, upon entering the high school entrance examination, their "conceit" was thoroughly annihilated.

By this divinely crafted young lady sitting next to her.

Based on their grades on the standardized magic tests, Honoka was fourth place behind Miyuki, Shizuku, and Morisaki. In Honoka's opinion, even if Shizuku didn't count, she didn't feel that she was any weaker than Morisaki.

The first subject in the high school standardized exam was a simple technique involving ten processes. (Only someone of Honoka's caliber would be able to call "ten processes" as simple.)

There was no real stress from the technique and Morisaki only seized the advantage because of his superior speed. If this was a more complex technique with additional processes, Honoka was adamant that she would have outperformed him.

Yet Miyuki was an "exception".

She possessed the overwhelming ability and strength that made jealousy itself ludicrous.

Even if someone claimed she was from the Ten Master Clans, Honoka would undoubtedly hold that to be true.

But that was only natural.

—That was what Honoka thought when she first beheld Miyuki's magic in the entrance examination area.

Honoka was completely unaware how close she was to the truth, proving beyond doubt how utterly Miyuki's magic astounded and overwhelmed her.

This impression followed her for the next four months in school and, rather than being diluted, only intensified even more.

Honoka felt that even the solitary Shizuku would not be able to calmly manipulate her magic normally if Miyuki stood before her.

When she learned that Miyuki was being switched to Mirage Bat for the Official Division, and thus avoided meeting her on the field, Honoka let out a huge sigh of relief.

As she thought back to the time of the entrance exam, Honoka was naturally reminded of the first time she saw "him".

In reality, Honoka's first encounter with Tatsuya was not the incident that occurred shortly after the day of enrollment. It was not the time when Erika and company were arrayed against them, with Honoka casting magics against school rules that would have landed her in a world of trouble with the Public Morals Committee Chief had Tatsuya not intervened. Honoka had encountered Tatsuya long before this incident.

Coincidentally on the day of the entrance examination, not just Miyuki, but Tatsuya was also in the same testing group as Honoka.

This pair of siblings was not outwardly similar.

Honoka didn't possess the excess mental finesse to remember everyone's names.

The reason Tatsuya left a lasting impression on Honoka wasn't because he was Miyuki's older brother.

His technical scores were only so-so.

Regardless of speed, strength, scale, every subject was thoroughly mundane and unappealing, to the point that they could be labeled as below average.

However, his magic was so beautiful it was breathtaking!

Honoka was incapable of analyzing Magic Sequences like Tatsuya.

Neither was she like Mizuki in her sensitivity towards psions and pushions.

When compared to normal Magicians, Honoka, who specialized in light wave oscillation magic, was only acutely sensitive towards the magical side effects that created light wave background noise.

An overabundance of interference or remnants of Magic Sequences would all form into surplus psion surges and oscillate in the empty air. When photons interact with these responses, the ensuing result is light wave noise.

But this cacophony was wholly undetectable in his magic.

In other words, there were no excess materials in his Magic Sequence. His Magic Power was expanded to its limit and entirely devoted towards phenomenon rewriting, making for a magic that was calculated down to the last detail.

Honoka thought that it was a work of pure art.

Hitherto, she had never seen such a beautiful piece of magic.

Afterwards, even though she bore witness to Miyuki's dominating magic, she still couldn't forget that magic.

That's why Honoka felt deeply betrayed when she saw the lack of the eight petal flower on Tatsuya's breast during the student orientation.

This was the reason why Honoka nursed an overly antagonistic attitude towards Tatsuya's group that day.

—Why are you on that side (Course 2)!?

—Why aren't you on this one (Course 1)!?

Honoka's eyes were blurred by this illogical fury.

True, in terms of speed, strength and scale, every category clearly set him far from the standards (of a Course 1 student).

Yet, the fact that "he" who could weave such wondrous magic had to be satisfied with being a mere "substitute (Weed)", Honoka felt that this was utterly unforgivable.

"......Honoka, what's wrong?'

Shocked, Honoka turned to her side to find Miyuki watching her in confusion.

She must have noticed that Honoka had fallen into an odd state of silence in the middle of their conversation.

"S-Sorry, it's nothing."

Even she would suspect herself if something of that sort had happened. When she considered her actions as well as her misdirected "anger displacement" and the reason why she consciously noticed "him", Honoka blushed to the roots of her hair and drooped her head.

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"It's finally Kitayama's match."

"Looks like she's carrying a Generalized CAD."

Two ladies from the Women's Team brass were hunched shoulder to shoulder in front of a screen at the pavilion. Suzune, who was overloaded with work from the unending stream of results, sighed as she beheld this sight.

Yet, the two of them blatantly ignored this obvious sign of displeasure.

"I wonder what trick he's got up his sleeve this time."

"Hard to say. Maybe he's intentionally playing mind games with us and will launch a full frontal assault precisely because we're thinking that way."

Mayumi and Mari were congregated in front of the widescreen monitor just like two young children sharing their favorite television show.

Suzune had long since given up. Sighing once more, she accepted the inevitability of working alone.

Neither Mayumi nor Mari batted an eyelid at Shizuku's choice of wardrobe.

For three time Nine Schools Competition veterans like them, this didn't qualify as anything outlandish.

In fact, they may be thinking "Huh, there are actually less of them this year!"

Also owing to this reason, Shizuku was someone who came to watch the Nine Schools Competition every year, so she wasn't embarrassed by her dress either.

"Ho, we're starting."

The two of them edged closer to the screen.

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The lights next to the flanks of the arena flashed red.

The lights advanced to yellow, and the moment when the lights turned green—

Shizuku's ring started dancing along the command console.

Toward her own 12 icicles.

She set all of them as targets and fired the Magic Sequence.

Immediately afterward, her opponent's magic came rushing towards Shizuku's field.

This was a popular tactic involving Move-Type Magic to blitzkrieg the opponent's field.

Except Shizuku's icicles stood rock solid against her opponent's magic and didn't shift at all.

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"Ho, Data Fortification."

Every HQ was equipped with a widescreen monitor that could analyze the magic being used as well as the type of magic used and its strength. Much like a heat display, the various displays were expressed through various shades of color.

Using this function, it was a simple matter to determine the offensive and defensive positions.

Data Fortification.

Eidos was a record of the current status of an information body. Through this information body, parts of the information or even the entire whole could be replicated and projected back into the target to protect the Eidos from being altered any further. This was known as Data Fortification within the Counter Magic field. The copied portions from Data Fortification possess the ability to prevent magic from affecting the target.

Shizuku used Data Fortification to emphasize the target's location "right there". As the screen plainly displayed, her opponent's Move-Type Magic was nullified by Shizuku's magic.

"Quite the direct confrontation."

"Wasn't this precisely how Mari predicted?"

Suzune, who overheard the conversation, couldn't help but think: "Not really, I hardly think that this strategy was created solely to play with your heads......" Of course, this thought couldn't be passed to the mesmerized observers.

"Still, I think that for Magicians with high interference strength like Kitayama-san, rather than using Data Fortification, she should use wide area interference as a 'frontal assault'."

"Based on yesterday's results, Kitayama also has high magic capacity that is hard to find. She shouldn't feel any stress from copying the Eidos. Also, for Interference-Type Magic, Data Fortification is more efficient compared to wide area interference."

On the screen, her opponent once again tried to use Move-Type Magic to attack, but was nullified just as before.

Simultaneously, just as the attacking magic faded away—

Three of the icicles in the opponent's field shattered.

"......What just happened right now? Mayumi, did you catch that?"

Mari asked in confusion, but Mayumi turned around without any confidence in her expression.

"I can only guess based on the data from the screen......"

Obviously, observing the analysis was vastly different from feeling the magic from the front lines.

"I think, that may have been the application of 'Resonance'."

The monitor was unable to keep up with the effects of indirect magic on the target, so the only way to narrow down what magic was used was through the surrounding environment.

"She shifted the irregular frequency from the Oscillation Magic into her opponent's field and locked the frequency just as it started to resonate with the icicles and raised the output at the same time, thus creating resonance. I think that's how it was."

"So that's how she did it...... To avoid Counter Magic, she didn't directly attack the icicles using magic attacks, but used the ground as a medium. While they both used the ground as a medium, when compared to Kanon's 'Mine Genesis' that relied purely on physical power, this is a much higher level technique. Sometimes I really can't tell who the upperclassman is."

"Precisely because finding the resonance point takes some time, she used Data Fortification to buy time. She looks very adept with manipulating the oscillation frequency."

"Indeed."

Mayumi and Mari were both thinking about the Non-Systematic Magic Tatsuya used to crush Hattori. It also utilized precisely manipulated psion surges to create overlapping oscillations.

What was being displayed on the monitor wasn't just Shizuku's artistic ability, but the hand of Tatsuya working from behind the scenes. On that point, neither of them disagreed.

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(As expected of Shizuku, she's doing admirably......)

Tatsuya quietly nodded as he surveyed the players from the opposite side of the screen.

Four icicles had already fallen in the opposing field.

All 12 icicles were still standing in the allied field.

The biological displays on the screen revealed only minor exhaustion, so there was no impact on the ability to maintain magic invocation.

There was no trace of any symptoms that could exhaust a player like the ones Eimi displayed. And regardless of whether it was "Data Fortification" or "Resonance", her performance was just as expected. Nay, her performance surpassed what she could do in training.

Half of Mayumi and Mari's hypothesis was spot on, but the other half was incorrect. Shizuku's mother was the one who specialized in "Resonance". Before teaming up with Tatsuya, Shizuku was already well versed in that technique (by a high school student's standards).

By using magic that raised the oscillation frequency at irregular levels and directly projecting that on the target while synchronizing the frequencies, this destroyed the target using precise oscillation frequencies at the exact moment when resistance was the weakest. Originally, "Resonance" was this type of two-stage process. When applying oscillation-type magic onto the target object, a Magician can feel out the resonance point based on the Eidos' resistance to the interfering Magic Sequence; if using regular intervals, then an alternate method would have to be used to identify the target's resonance.

This was not reliant on monitoring devices, but done while compiling Activation Sequences into Magic Sequences. That was the part that Tatsuya was responsible for.

This technique was created by adding a new process into the "Resonance" magic that Shizuku was familiar with. Yet, Shizuku was able to wield this at will. Obviously, this level of skill was not obtained by just training in school, but honed through long hours of practice outside of class.

As another icicle collapsed in the enemy's field, one of the allied icicles collapsed as well.

However, this was only her opponent's "last gasp". Tatsuya could tell with a glance.

The opposing player threw everything she had into that last attack. She most likely knew the writing on the wall, but desperately wanted to avoid being defeated without knocking down a single icicle.

Tatsuya watched Shizuku's back with his own eyes and not through the monitor.

The psions she was releasing were not ruffled in the slightest.

No sense of wavering, no hint of pride. At the same time that she vigorously defended her own territory, she retaliated against her opponent's field.

Probably because she wasn't fixated on her opponent for some bizarre reason. She was fighting in a manner that put anyone watching her at ease.

Her opponent, who had expended all her energy, did not put up any futile resistance.

The three icicles in the enemy's territory shattered apart like a sand castle standing against the incoming tide.

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Miyuki's match was the last one in the first round.

This was a long wait from early morning, but since lunch time was also figured into the time, this didn't feel that long for her.

Speaking of Tatsuya, he was also up since morning and this was his third match, so he was hardly "waiting".

Miyuki and Tatsuya were the only ones in the resting area for players.

Honoka and Shizuku were nowhere in sight.

They had mentioned during lunch that they would be cheering her on during the match. Now, they probably already met up with Erika's crew.

In recompense, which was hardly the issue at hand, Isori and Kanon as well as Mayumi and Mari came to support her.

(It's a huge cheerleading party......)

Tatsuya wore a helpless look on his face as he murmured in the privacy of his mind. Of course, he actually said something else.

"I'm glad that you all came to cheer on Miyuki, but...... Chief, shouldn't you be in bed?"

"What, even you're treating me like an invalid? It's not like I have to hop around and dance, so there's no problem."

Yet, it was still a serious injury. Tatsuya swallowed those words and directed the conversation towards Mayumi.

"Oh...... Then shouldn't the President be at the pavilion? I thought the Men's Team is still in the middle of their event."

"No problem. I left that to Hanzou-kun. I'm also stepping down two months from now, so it's not a good idea to rely on me for everything."

This was a valid argument, but smacked of someone feigning silliness.

Still, their presence wasn't going to negatively affect the match, so continuing this conversation would do more harm than good.

"Miyuki, we have so many reliable senpais here to cheer you on, make sure you're not more anxious than usual."

Pfft, someone was snickering in the back, but Tatsuya chose to ignore that.

Apparently, he was doting on Miyuki too much. But for Tatsuya, his sister was always (logically) going to be his sister.

"Please do not concern yourself. Because Onii-sama is by my side."

Following that, Miyuki raised her head and gazed at her brother whom she had complete faith in. In her ears, all other sounds became inaudible.

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Miyuki's appearance on the platform threw the crowd into pandemonium.

"That, incredibly, that is......"

"But suits her quite well. What do you think, Kanon?"

"I say, that's simply gorgeous."

Tatsuya tuned out Kanon and Isori's conversation like it was a BGM and focused on preparations to monitor Miyuki's status. In the blink of an eye, the preparations were complete. Tatsuya peered towards Miyuki and suddenly realized: "Right, that's what everyone is staring at."

Miyuki was dressed in a fine white hakui paired with a crimson hakama. Her hair was held back by a white strap.

True, the hairstyle was slightly different and if in place of a CAD she held bells or a sakai, she would be even more stunning. It was that kind of garb.

Originally, she was already gorgeous and now paired with this wardrobe, she gave off an almost divine aura.

No, perhaps she had already surpassed divine possession and was now approaching the realms of the gods themselves.

"Ouch, her opponent seems to have been submerged."

"Nothing they can do about that. Even I must admit that I can't hold a candle to that. ......Ah, unless that was the goal all along?"

Mayumi and Mari's voices from behind him were plainly directed towards himself. Tatsuya turned around and replied.

"By goal, you mean what? There's nothing particularly astounding about using that attire for magic ceremonies."

Still, his answer was literally the answer to a literal question, but there was clearly a mismatch in what both sides wanted to communicate.

"......Tatsuya-kun's family follows the Shinto system?"

This time the question was even more off the mark. After Mayumi's unrelenting pursuit, Tatsuya didn't hesitate as he shook his head.

"Hardly, it's simply because we're Japanese."

"......Really, maybe, fine."

Mayumi reluctantly nodded. Tatsuya left with a "Let's end the conversation here" and turned back towards the monitors.

Tatsuya's words themselves were hard to deny and were fairly logical.

Yet, if someone witnessed the entire process, they would immediately be able to tell that he wasn't being uniform the entire time.

They were both kimonos, but Tatsuya had a conflicted view of Shizuku's tamotos yet didn't question his own sister's miko getup. Tatsuya's sensibilities on this — objectively speaking — were indeed suspicious.

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Miyuki was wholly unaware of the drama unfolding on the back stage — well, that was only to be expected — as she calmly waited for the start signal.

"False starts" were a major violation of the rules.

Being overly enthusiastic could subconsciously activate magic, which was your own fault. Well aware of this fallacy, Miyuki wasn't fired up during the waiting period like all the other players, but was concentrating on restraining herself.

......In the eyes of others, this was a "posture of silence".

The signal lights on both ends of the arena flashed red.

Miyuki opened her faintly closed eyes and gazed directly at the enemy field.

A sigh arose from the audience.

And not just in one area either, but from nearly the entire arena.

Surprisingly, it wasn't the young men, but the young women who were mesmerized by that fiery gaze.

This was no longer the atmosphere expected from mere spectating.

With apologies to the other player, the entire audience was fixated on Miyuki's every move.

The signal light flashed yellow, and just as it turned green—

An intense psion light flooded the entire area without heed to allied or enemy territories.

Yet, the arena — had turned into two different seasons.

An absolute chill enshrouded Miyuki's field.

A burning heat wave flooded her opponent's field.

The icicles in her opponent's field started to melt.

Her opponent was desperately trying to apply cooling magic with no apparent effect whatsoever.

Her own position had turned into a frozen hell that surpassed the winds of winter.

Her opponent's field transformed into a scorched purgatory that rivaled summer's might.

Still, all of this lasted only the briefest of moments.

Swiftly,

Her field was completely enveloped in chilling mist.

While her opponent's field was devoured by the rising steam.

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"That can't be......"

"Inferno......?"

Behind him, Tatsuya could hear Mari and Mayumi's murmurs and groans.

They were certainly spot on, Tatsuya thought, yet he didn't turn around.

Tatsuya's gaze was still locked on the display of Miyuki's back from the monitoring device.

Medium-Scale Oscillation-Type Magic "Inferno".

By dividing the target area into two sections and decreasing the kinetic and rotational energy of all objects within one section, this surplus energy could be released into the other section in the form of heat. This way, conservation of energy was still maintained while applying the principle of reverse entropy from thermodynamics.

Occasionally, this magic served as the test for A-Rank Magicians. Many testers shed bitter tears at their inability to wield this highly difficult magic, but for Miyuki, this was merely a triviality that she could manipulate at will.

Since this was originally an area-of-effect magic, there was no need to worry needlessly about magic leaking outside and breaking the rules. Still, the very definition of magic forced Magicians to be extremely careful even with the simplest of techniques. If an incident were to occur, she would immediately be disqualified from the match, which would prompt him to intervene by any means necessary. This was what was running across Tatsuya's mind as he watched Miyuki.

However, he appeared to be agitated over nothing.

The temperature in the enemy's field rocketed past 200 degrees Celsius.

Flash freeze icicles that were formed in a hurry were nothing more than rough ice cubes with countless pockets of air within. These pockets would rapidly expand when heated, causing the icicle itself to crack despite the icicle becoming more fluid under the heat.

Suddenly, the temperature stopped rising.

Immediately afterwards, a shock wave burst spread across the enemy field.

Miyuki had switched magics.

She was compressing and releasing the air.

Every frail icicle within the enemy field shattered as one.

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There were a total of 360 contestants and 72 technicians. While some schools waived their right to tactical advisors, the number of total participants in the Nine Schools Competition still exceeded 450 students. If there was a ball (or even banquet), this number of people could still be managed, but that was practically impossible to achieve on a daily basis during the main event.

Breakfast was done buffet style on a first come, first serve basis. Lunch consisted of bentos being delivered to each school's pavilion or engineering vehicles, though some people chose to take them back to their rooms. Dinner was served in the three dining halls over three separate sessions, with each school getting one hour to dine. (The schools dined separately to avoid their tactics leaking to other schools.)

Actually, dinner was the only opportunity for the entire school team to congregate in the dining hall.

This one hour of dinner was an invaluable time for sharing the day's triumphs and regrets.

Tonight, at the First High tables, a clear line was drawn between light and darkness.

Darkness covered the corner where the 1st Year male players were gathered.

Light enshrouded the corner where the 1st Year female players were gathered.

And among the dense jungle of female players, the small dash of red (or maybe green is more appropriate in the jungle?) was, of course, Tatsuya.

"Miyuki, that was totally awesome."

"So that's 'Inferno'? The senpais were completely shocked. It's said that even A-Rank Magicians have problems with that ability."

"Eimi, nicely done! Your first match was a little tight though."

"Cavalier gear with carbine stance, nice!"

"Shizuku was great too! Your kimono with tamoto was simply beautiful, then you forced your opponent steadily into a corner. Cool~!"

While the Newcomers Division Crowd Ball only clinched one Second Place and one Sixth Place, yielding a "so-so" result, the dominating performance from the Icicle Destruction players allowed all three to advance to the third round, continuing the triumphant performance from the Speed Shooting event. This caused the female players to bask in a festive mood.

The format of the Icicle Destruction event had 24 players in total, with 12 matches in the first round and 6 matches in the second round. With three people advancing to the third round, First High laid claim to fully half of the players still in the field.

The three victors from the third round would then engage in a round robin to decide the ultimate victor, though based on the current situation, there was a strong possibility that all three of those positions may be claimed by players from First High. If so, that would truly be an astounding feat. The very fact that this remained a distinct possibility made it "impossible" for them not to be beside themselves with joy.

The upperclassmen all wore smiles that said "What are we going to do with you guys" as the underclassmen danced around in joy.

"Shiba-kun, Shizuku's ability was a 'Resonance' variant, right?"

The 1st Year female student who came over was not one of the players Tatsuya was responsible for. He was aware of who she was, but was not overly familiar. Wholly ill at ease (Miyuki vetoed his request to sit elsewhere) as he dined, Tatsuya was suddenly the center of attention and finally managed a somewhat ordinary reply.

"That is correct."

Quite the detached reply but even so, his voice was slightly gentler than usual. While they were peers in the same cohort, the other person was a

Course 1 female student that he rarely interacted with normally. Tatsuya was taking precautions not to frighten her off by accident.

Unfortunately, this caution brought about a crescendo in response.

"So the Activation Sequence was really designed by Shiba-kun?"

"I heard that Shiba-kun developed the technique Shizuku used during Speed Shooting, right?"

"Shiba-kun also devised the strategy for Inferno too."

"Rumor has it that Shiba-kun was also the mastermind behind Honoka's flashbang strategy."

The continuous stream of questions gave him no room to maneuver and continuously drained his mental facilities, not that there was anything Tatsuya could do about it. Still, they were currently in a stimulated state which likely used the current festive mood as stress relief for the continuous anxiety from the competition. From another perspective, this exaggerated praise may even be seen as flaunting in order to raise their self-confidence to combat that feeling of unease that couldn't be easily dispelled. Tatsuya could understand that feeling, so he intentionally avoided dampening their enthusiasm and patiently continued to listen.

"That's great...... If Shiba-kun was my support, I could probably win too."

However, this phrase was still taking things too far and couldn't be ignored.

Despite this, he probably shouldn't be the one who pointed this out. Tatsuya glanced subtly at Miyuki, who was sitting beside him.

"Nanami, I think there's something wrong with that sentiment."

Upon being gently reprimanded, this female student immediately realized that her words could be easily mistaken for her dissatisfaction with her supporting technician.

Her attitude did a complete 180 as she frantically rose to her feet, babbling the entire time, and searched the upperclassmen for the engineer responsible for her. Upon discovering the engineer smiling and waving at her, she finally let out a deep sigh of relief, bowed deeply in apology, then returned to her seat.

"I-I spoke poorly."

"Nana, you can't place your own inadequacies all on the CAD."

"Teehee...... Reflecting."

The volume level for the young ladies' conversation had dropped considerably, but didn't nearly qualify as whispering.

"But there is no doubt that thanks to Shiba-kun, I'm performing much better than usual."

This time it was Takigawa, a female student that took Third Place in Speed Shooting, who spoke up. Eimi nodded excessively at this.

"On some level, CAD calibration is the same thing as telling your darkest secrets, isn't it? And towards a male engineer to boot...... While I did think like that in the beginning, but to have Shiba-kun be my engineer is simply incredible! Here's to the boys who were willing to yield Shiba-kun to us!"

Tatsuya could only smile wryly at the massive misunderstanding hidden behind that innocent smile.

However, there were also people who couldn't muster even a wry smile.

"Ah, hey!"

With a violent "bang", one of the boys stood up.

Heedless of anyone trying to stop him, Morisaki picked up his silverware and headed towards the catering area before leaving the dining hall altogether.

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Coincidentally at the same time.

Though it wasn't a sumptuous feast, there was an entire array of high class Chinese cuisine — far more lavish than any high school banquet — spread across the table that was surrounded by a crowd of dismal expressions. There was a colossal difference between the luxurious gold and red decorations and the dour faces of the men present.

"......Wasn't Third High supposed to be favored for the Newcomers Division?"

They were conversing in English.

"We finally managed to force Watanabe to bow out, but...... If this continues, wouldn't First High triumph again?"

However, the people present showed clear signs of mixed European and East Asian heritage.

"If the favored candidate wins, the house will be hemorrhaging money!"

"There are a lot of VIPs in the casinos this time. Even if we do pay out, this isn't a small sum for us. We'll probably be facing a gaping deficient in the beginning of the business quarter. If that's the case......"

The men peered at one another with grave expressions.

"......Everyone here will be purged by headquarters. Based on the size of our loss, the head may do the honors himself!"

One of the men murmured softly as he peered at the snaking dragon embroidered with gold thread in the middle of the hanging axle.

A heavy silence fell over all the men.

"Dying might be the best thing that could happen to us......"

Someone muttered.

In a voice quaking with terror.

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Unlike magic related sports events, gender differences didn't really impact magic competitions.

Even so, when taking into account that physical abilities still hold the decisive edge in events like Battle Board or Crowd Ball, the Newcomers Division separated the genders from this year forth.

In other words, this was the first year that the men and women competed separately in the Newcomers Division.

Until last year, there was no separation by gender, so men usually competed in events like Battle Board or Crowd Ball, while women chose to participate in events such as Icicle Destruction or Speed Shooting that were less taxing on the physical body. Thanks to this (the ratio favored male participants due to school differences), the audience was generally split between watching two different types of events.

So which was more popular, the Men's competition or the Women's competition?

Based on the Official Division from previous years, the average spectator usually observed the Women's events, while the military, police, firefighters, and university related personnel paid closer attention to the Men's competition.

—Then again, speaking of this year's Newcomers Division.

"There are a lot of people here......"

"There were plainly more open seats during the Men's competition."

Two young ladies were sitting in the empty reserved observation area and cast pitying gazes across the spectator stands that were filled to capacity.

They were Mayumi and Mari.

"Somehow, I feel that there are a lot of people from the universities."

Mayumi said this as she directed her gaze towards the VIP stands.

"After seeing that yesterday, they wouldn't be satisfied with just a recording, would they?"

Mari completely agreed.

"Exactly. Aren't we here to watch as well?"

To preserve all fairness, the order of the matches was reversed from yesterday.

It was the sixth day of the Nine Schools Competition and third day of the Newcomers Division.

The first match of the third round in Icicle Destruction was about to take place.

Mayumi glanced at the time and waited for Miyuki to take the stage.

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Turn back the clock for a few moments.

As Tatsuya and Miyuki were headed towards the resting area for Icicle Destruction, two students from Third High appeared before them.

Both of them were male students.

One of them matched Tatsuya's physique in terms of height and shoulder width, to the point that it was extremely difficult to tell the difference. However, that student had a much more stunning appearance.

The other student was significantly shorter. Thanks in part to the school's reputation for emphasizing martial abilities, this did not give off a weak impression.

They appeared to have noticed Tatsuya at the same time and directly walked towards him.

"I am Ichijou Masaki, Third High, 1st Year."

The taller one spoke first.

For people that have just met for the first time, his tone was slightly overbearing, but amazingly, Tatsuya didn't seem to mind.

While both of them were 1st Year students, Ichijou Masaki naturally fit into a leadership role and seemed to exude the charismatic aura of a true leader.

Both his eyes were focused on Tatsuya.

"Likewise, Kichijouji Shinkurou, also from Third High's 1st Year."

The shorter youth spoke politely and identified himself with a more traditional air, though his eyes teemed with a challenging glint.

"First High, 1st Year, Shiba Tatsuya. So, the 'Crimson Prince' and 'Cardinal George' in the flesh, what may I do for you?"

No sense of malice.

Slightly different from sheer enmity.

Still, there was no question that this was not a friendly attitude.

Strictly speaking, it was a naked fighting spirit.

Just like Masaki, Tatsuya also responded in a tone that would be considered overly rude for first acquaintances in his usual manner.

Tatsuya felt that putting on a mask of false friendship would be insulting to these two.

"Ho...... So you know of George's reputation as well as mine? Well that makes this simple."

"Shiba Tatsuya...... A hitherto unknown name, but I shall never forget this name. You are probably the most ingenious technician since the advent of the Nine Schools Competition. I'm afraid we are lacking in manners here, but all we wished for was to meet you once."

"I am honored to be called a 'genius' by the prodigy that discovered the Cardinal Code at age 13...... But you are right in that this is against the norm."

As for his own manner of speaking, he replied back in a frank and straightforward fashion.

Yet, neither of them appeared irritated. They came with absolute determination and maintained a posture one usually reserves for a serious opponent.

"Miyuki, go ahead and prepare."

Tatsuya did not lift his eyes from these two as he gave his instructions to Miyuki. Tatsuya estimated that they would be here for a while.

"I understand."

Miyuki bowed towards Tatsuya and departed for the resting area without sparing Masaki a single glance, as if the pair did not exist within her dimension. There wasn't even a hint that she was intentionally avoiding them — that was how perfectly she rendered them to non-existence.

For an instant, Masaki's eyes followed Miyuki, but swiftly reverted back to Tatsuya.

"......'Prince', isn't your side about to begin?"

The split second of wavering and reluctance did not escape Tatsuya's eyes. Inwardly, he let out a small breath.

Unwavering, Tatsuya's eyes forced Masaki to reply.

"......We will appear in tomorrow's Monolith Code."

Yet, the one who replied for him was Kichijouji.

Kichijouji was the champion for the Newcomers Division Speed Shooting event, while Masaki was favored to clinch the crown for the Newcomers Division Icicle Destruction event. Naturally, it was expected that each school would commit their aces to the Monolith Code event.

"What are your plans?"

Although he wanted to ask what he was referring to, there wasn't enough time left.

"I'm not responsible for that."

That being said, he had no obligation to reveal any details, so he went with the abstract answer.

"Is that so...... That's unfortunate. One day, I wish to line up against the players you're responsible for. Of course, we will triumph."

Kichijouji's words caused Tatsuya to feel "Are you throwing down now?". But he quickly thought otherwise, since these guys originally came to challenge him in the first place.

"Sorry for taking your time. We look forward to meeting on the field of battle."

Before Tatsuya could respond to Kichijouji, Masaki made this declaration and walked past Tatsuya with Kichijouji.

—So they're still a rude bunch in the end. Tatsuya thought as he headed towards the resting area where Miyuki was waiting for him without turning his head in the slightest.

"What were they up to?"

The first thing Miyuki asked when she came out of the changing room was about the earlier scene.

"Scouting, I think? Still felt pointless though."

Tatsuya tilted his head and chose to reply in neutral terms and handed Miyuki the CAD he had prepared for her while she was changing.

If there were any extraneous distractions before the match, this would only negatively impact the match itself, so Tatsuya moved to curtail the conversation with haste. Yet, after Miyuki heard Tatsuya's reply, she burst into laughter as if finding some profound meaning in his words.

"I think that's their declaration of war, Onii-sama."

He wasn't ignorant of what his sister was referring to. He himself felt those two came to specifically challenge him.

But in Tatsuya's eyes, this was a pointless gesture.

"......You don't believe me?"

Even though Miyuki rolled her eyes upward and pouted sulkily, this wasn't something he was going to let slide so easily.

"No, well...... I'm not a contestant, right? I don't believe these two renowned individuals who have extended their reputations beyond the scope of magic high school students would view a nameless person like myself a rival."

"Rival" was based on the assumption that they acknowledged that both sides were equal.

Objectively speaking, from outward appearances, he wasn't even in the same strata as those two. Superficially, comparing themselves with him was a ridiculous notion. Furthermore, they didn't appear to have discovered his secrets either.

Ordinarily, it was frankly impossible for the "Crimson Prince" or "Cardinal George" to see him as an opponent — Tatsuya thought.

Upon seeing her older brother actually thinking this way and not out of humility, the sister sighed deeply.

"......Onii-sama, underestimating your own abilities would be fatal in battle. Exactly how highly you are valued, how greatly you are watched, even how much other schools view Onii-sama — how fiercely their antagonism burns because of Onii-sama's skills and strategies — I think Onii-sama should consider all of this objectively once more."

For Miyuki, this was an exceedingly rare, and blunt, counsel.

This was a completely unexpected boldness and unimaginable reproach. Tatsuya could only stand there and watch her blankly.

This was the third time Miyuki used her mysterious beauty to captivate the hearts of the audience at the same time that she wielded her terrible might to vanquish the enemy.

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On the waves where Battle Board would be decided, the first round of the Women's semifinals was about to begin.

The players were already at their starting positions.

Honoka's figure was among them.

"Hm~"

"..........."

"That's a little......"

"..........."

"OK, that, uh......"

"..........."

"What the heck are you two doing?"

All three players were side by side at the starting line. In the stands, Erika was humming in frustration while Mizuki was utterly silent by her side. Finally caving, Leo asked reluctantly.

"Isn't that just~, a little strange? All the players are wearing sunglasses."

"Erika-chan, those are called 'goggles'......"

Indeed, just as Erika and Miyuki said, not just Honoka, but the other two were wearing dark protective goggles as well.

"Isn't that obvious? This is the most reliable countermeasure to Honoka-san's light magic."

Mikihiko's analysis was grounded in common sense, causing Erika to adopt a "How boring~" expression as she laughed mirthlessly.

"......What's wrong with that?"

"But~, doesn't that mean they fell for Tatsuya-kun's strategy? Battle Board players don't use goggles because the water droplets may interfere with their sight. This is a key reason. Yet they quickly adopted goggles after being flashed once...... There should be other ways to counter light magic......"

"Is Honoka-san planning on using the water to obscure their vision?"

Erika nodded in disinterest.

However.

"That's hard to say...... I doubt that Tatsuya will rely on such a mundane tactic."

"......Possibly."

Mikihiko's words seemed to rouse some of Erika's interest.

This time, no flash occurred immediately after the start.

"She's slow out the gate!?"

"No, she's right behind!"

As they navigated the snaking tunnel in front of the observation deck, Honoka was in second place entering the first sharp curve.

"Eh?"

At this location, the player in first place took an odd route.

Not only did she massively reduce speed, she even drew close to the middle of the route.

Honoka also decelerated, but took a steeper angle that just barely cleared the bend and snatched first place from the player who took the roundabout route.

"What, just happened?"

Normally, players either reduced speed drastically and hugged the inside route, or took a wider angle but controlled their deceleration.

The route taken by the other player could be described as amateurish. Not only did she drastically reduce speed, she also left a huge passing lane.

"......There seem to be shadows floating in the waterways."

Following Leo's observation, Erika squinted and shouted out.

"Ah, there it is again!"

This time it was a wide arc way.

The player that Honoka passed once again left a huge gap between her and the wall and slowed down more than necessary to pass the angle. The ensuing result left her farther and farther behind Honoka.

"......No wonder, so that's how it is."

"Eh, what?"

Erika asked Mikihiko, who was nodding in appreciation.

"Tatsuya's intent was to have the other players don goggles that are shaded against light. This point coincided with Erika's guess."

Mikihiko spoke with animation, as if completely abandoning his usual irrational stubbornness.

"However, this isn't for using the water spray to occlude their sight, but to make the dark areas harder to perceive."

"So that's why! Illusions can also be used like this......!"

"Indeed. By turning the lit areas darker, you are able to manipulate your opponent's moves. Ultimately, magic depends on application......"

"......Would the two of you care to enlighten me as well instead of amusing yourselves."

At Leo's displeased voice, Mikihiko finally stirred from his daydream.

"Sorry, sorry. In other words, Tatsuya's strategy is......"

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"Shiba-kun's strategy is very simple.

He used light wave oscillation magic to control the light along the water route.

The protective goggles already restricted vision considerably. This is now compounded by the darkened route, causing people to misjudge the distance to the edge, hereby forcing the opposing players away from the darkness....... In summation, he narrowed the area the players dared to navigate through."

Hattori, with Kirihara in tow, was holding the fort in place of Katsuto, who had gone to observe the Men's Icicle Destruction event. They were currently listening to every word of Suzune's explanation.

"Even if the mind says otherwise and claims that the water's surface shoulder is wider, it remains a difficult task to override physical perception. At the same time, regardless of who the player is, anyone would have a harder time raising their speed along a narrow corridor. Thus, this strategy is grounded in denying the other players from bringing out their full potential."

"......But, wouldn't Honoka-san be affected herself?"

"That's why she has repeatedly trained under similar conditions."

Hattori's question prompted a simplistic answer.

"......Generally, the user remains unaffected by the magic itself, so no worries."

"Don't relax just yet. Shiba-kun said that 'the width of the water way is fixed, so use your body rather than your eyes to memorize it'."

Hearing Suzune's reply, Kirihara muttered.

"......So rather than being a clever strategy, it turned out to be a full frontal assault anyway....... This could only come from someone with one hell of a mean streak."

Kirihara's impression caused Suzune to burst into laughter.

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After the morning matches, the pavilion reserved for First High turned into an ocean of festivities.

All three participants in the Newcomers Division Women's Icicle Destruction third round won.

In the round robin portion of the event during the afternoon, every player came from First High.

Honoka also advanced to the finals for Battle Board. This was a result that could only be described as "dominating".

The only people who couldn't join in the fun were the ten players from the 1st Year Men's team.

If they competed normally, the male members would surely achieve similarly impressive results. That being said, their blind animosity led to repeated mental errors that only increased as their numbers dwindled and their frustration mounted, throwing them into a vicious cycle of self-destruction.

Among them, the three players from Icicle Destruction — Miyuki, Shizuku, and Eimi, as well as Tatsuya, the technician responsible, were not present because they were summoned to one of the hotel's conference rooms.

"We're pressed for time, so I'll keep this short."

Mayumi was the one who called them here. She was the only one waiting for them.

"Until now, no school has ever monopolized the round robin portion of this event. Shiba-san, Kitayama-san, Akechi-san, your performances have been exemplary."

Politely, calmly, and frantically, the three of them displayed three different attitudes as they bowed in thanks to Mayumi's praise.

"In recognition of this feat, the board has a proposal. They say that regardless of what the standings for the round robin are, our school will receive all the points anyway, so there's no need to play this out. All three of you will share First Place collectively."

The three of them looked at one another, with Tatsuya smiling sardonically in the back.

No matter how they tried to disguise this, the board was obviously trying to lighten his workload.

"It is up to all of you whether to accept the board's proposal. The only criterion is that you don't have much time to consider this. Please make a decision here and now."

Upon hearing Mayumi's words, Eimi started fidgeting as her eyes roamed around.

With her skill level, she was well aware that she had no chance against either Miyuki or Shizuku.

Up until this point, she was satisfied with Third Place, but it was simply human nature for people to desire First Place. It was too much of a stretch for her not to want this to happen.

Miyuki glanced at Tatsuya.

Shizuku also looked towards Tatsuya.

"Tatsuya-kun, what is your opinion? If all three were to fight it out, you would have a hard time managing all three."

So, Mayumi wished for the three of them to share First Place together, Tatsuya thought.

In truth, this was the most desirable outcome from the leadership's perspective.

"To be honest, based on Akechi-san's current condition, she would be better off avoiding the next round. The third round was too heated and it's hard to imagine that she can recover in one or two hours."

From Tatsuya's perspective, he didn't feel that he has to worry on this account. He was just speaking candidly.

"Is that so...... Akechi-san, do you agree with what Tatsuya-kun said?"

"Well, that...... Before I heard what you said, I was already ready to give up anyway. It is true that I'm not in optimal condition, so I was planning on bowing out after talking it over with Shiba-kun anyway...... Because Shiba-kun knows me better than I know myself."

Her tone was diffident, likely because she felt that she was shirking her responsibilities by accepting the board's proposal.

"Really."

Mayumi smiled to console her and nodded before turning to Miyuki and Shizuku.

"I......"

Shizuku spoke up first.

"Want to compete."

Her eyes burned with fiery determination as she looked Mayumi in the eye.

"After this, how many opportunities will I have to go all out against Miyuki...... I don't want to miss this chance."

"How unfortunate......"

Mayumi dropped her gaze to the ground and sighed.

"What does Miyuki-chan think?"

"If Kitayama-san wishes to compete against me, I have no reason to refuse."

Mayumi knew very well that Miyuki was made of sterner stuff that belied her appearance, so she was completely unsurprised by this response.

"I understand...... Then, I will report to the board that Akechi-san has withdrawn whereas Shiba-san and Kitayama-san will engage in a duel to decide the final round. The match should be the first one of the afternoon, so you had best take this opportunity to prepare."

After Mayumi finished speaking, the first one to bow was Tatsuya.

As he left the conference room, Miyuki and Shizuku immediately bowed to Mayumi and left right behind him. Eimi frantically bowed as well and said: "I'll take my leave."

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The stands were overflowing with spectators.

The changes in the Newcomers Division Women's Icicle Destruction event were quickly announced and intentionally set as the first match of the afternoon to avoid conflicting with other events.

Not just the normal stands, but even the reserved seating area for members was quickly filled.

There, Tatsuya could be seen sandwiched between Mayumi and Mari.

After finishing the calibrations for both their CADs, Tatsuya didn't accompany either Miyuki or Shizuku, but sat in the last row of the reserved seating area.

Before leaving, he left the two of them with these words.

The words, "Do your best".

"But in reality, you wanted to stay by Miyuki's side, didn't you?"

Alas, the rare "well meaning words" took on a different connotation when delivered from her lips as Mayumi revealed an evil smirk. For some reason, whenever she was with Tatsuya, her fiendish side seemed to rise dramatically.

"Yeah."

Undoubtedly because she was annoyed by Tatsuya's wooden reaction.

"......You sure admitted that easily."

Although she gave pretense to being mean, Mari's real nature was — perhaps — much kinder than Mayumi as she interjected with her almost signature retort.

"Do you know what Sister Complex means?"

"I don't think I follow. How does cheering on your own kin constitute being a sis-con?"

His direct rebuttal while feigning ignorance had long since become customary.

Except Mayumi and Mari had wised up to his tactics.

"Wow, did you hear that Mari? This child is actually confident in his own cause!"

"Looks seriously ill to me. Is it hopeless?"

Isn't it pointless to loudly gossip about the person stuck between them? Tatsuya thought. He was thoroughly helpless against this special way of "bullying the underclassman".

This short skit was nothing more than the appetizer before the curtains were drawn.

As if to prove this, when both players took the stage, the entire audience fell into complete silence.

In the arena, two young women stood facing one another.

On one side, her white hakui and crimson hakama filled the eyes.

On the other side, tamotos the color of water flooded the vision.

Miyuki didn't bind her hair; Shizuku didn't bring an obi.

The long, wavy hair and silk tamotos fluttered in the slight winds of summer.

The two young women were suffused with a suffocating silence.

This was the chilling "fighting spirit" that shared the name of this purely magical contest and was far removed from its burning counterpart.

The preparation signal light lit up.

The colors changed, and at the moment the beacon responsible for starting the match went off—

Magic flooded outward at the same moment.

A heat wave rushed towards Shizuku's field.

Yet, the icicles stubbornly resisted the incursion.

The wide area heat wave from "Inferno" was denied by the "Data Fortification" magic that stopped the changes in the icicles' temperature.

The earth groaned as magic rushed towards Miyuki's field.

But the oscillations were stamped out the moment they tried to resonate.

Wide area magic prevented oscillations and movement within her own field and extended across the earth's surface and below it as well.

The two of them went back and forth, taking turns using phenomenon rewriting on the other's icicles. This was a perfect stalemate, worthy of the praise from all the pundits and experts — on the outside.

But the combatants involved didn't think so.

(I can't get in......! As expected of Miyuki!)

Shizuku's "Resonance" was completely rejected by the enemy field.

In comparison, Miyuki's heat wave was enveloping Shizuku's field.

"Data Fortification" is a counter magic used to prevent magic from passing through and altering the Eidos.

It was unable to prevent the physical effects from magic.

Even if the magic couldn't directly influence the icicles' temperature, the heated air would cause the icicles to melt. It was only a matter of time.

(In that case!)

Shizuku stuck her left wrist with the CAD attached into her right sleeve.

She pulled out a pistol-shaped Specialized CAD in her hand.

This was the final trump card that Tatsuya had prepared for Shizuku.

Shizuku pointed the muzzle towards the front row of icicles in Miyuki's field and pulled the CAD's trigger.

(Dual-wielding CADs!? Shizuku, you managed to accomplish that?)

Seeing Shizuku's left hand also holding a pistol-shaped CAD, Miyuki inwardly wavered.

Wielding multiple CADs simultaneously was her brother's trademark ability. It was an extremely difficult technique that was almost "unique".

Miyuki believed that, for someone who could so easily lose control of magic like herself, it was far too soon for her to challenge that ability that demanded absolute control of her psions. At the same time, she was terrified of infringing upon her brother's favored technique.

However, at the current moment, Shizuku was wielding a second CAD before her very eyes.

Without arousing interference from the psion signal waves, the second CAD completed its Activation Sequence.

Instantly, Miyuki's magic stopped.

The sustained magic was curtailed in mid translation.

Now, Shizuku's new magic stormed forward.

"Phonon Maser!?"

Hearing Mayumi's gasp, Tatsuya privately applauded as if this new magic had nothing to do with him: "She certainly is well versed in magic!"

The front row of icicles in Miyuki's field started to give off white steam.

For three rounds, Miyuki's icicles were untouched — at the magical level — by her opponents, and were now damaged for the first time by enemy attack.

Oscillation-Systematic Magic "Phonon Maser" — a high level magic that raises the number of supersonic oscillations to form a quantum heat ray.

Even if this was the tactic that Tatsuya gave Shizuku to defeat Miyuki...... His expression remained oddly dark.

Not because Miyuki was in danger of being defeated.

But because he knew better than anyone else that relying on this level of strength to surpass that sister of his was nothing more than a pipe dream.

She faltered for all of one second.

Acting in concert with Shizuku's newly sustainable magic, Miyuki also switched magics.

The rising steam from the icicles — the sublimation of ice halted.

Not because she blocked the heat ray formed by the shooting supersonic waves, but because an absolute chill that surpassed the heat of "Phonon Maser" had materialized itself.

Miyuki's field was instantly enshrouded in a sublime, white mist.

The mist gradually drifted towards Shizuku's field.

Miyuki knew that Shizuku would raise the inference strength on "Data Fortification".

Despite this. Regardless.

(......Alas, you are too naive, Shizuku!)

The flowing mist was "cold air". Temperature change — magic that prevented melting had no effect on this magic.

"......'Niflheim' ....That's impossible, right? What magical dimension are we in here......"

Mari said in amazement.

Tatsuya shared that sentiment, but remained silent on the issue.

Wide Area Freezing Magic "Niflheim".

At the basic level, this technique ignored heat and appearance, using magic to uniformly cool down all the objects within a set area. Even so, in terms of practicality, this magic could be used to create Diamond Dust, Dry Ice Particles, or even large clouds of nitrogen gas in a pinch that could be advanced towards the target.

Likewise, its strength was building towards the strongest level.

The nitrogen mist passed through Shizuku's field and vanished near the other end of the arena.

On one side of Shizuku's icicles — the side facing Miyuki that is, nitrogen was coated on its surface, creating "dynamite" on the icicles.

Miyuki disabled "Niflheim" and once again activated "Inferno".

Shizuku's "Data Fortification" could only affect objects that originally existed within the area and thus had no impact on newly applied materials.

Lowering the temperature of nitrogen gas produced a cooling effect. Likewise, rapidly heating nitrogen liquid at temperatures far exceeding normal room temperature would instantly evaporate the nitrogen.

Expanding it to 700 times its size.

With a huge roar, Shizuku's icicles collapsed as one. It was unknown whether the roar came from the icicles hitting the earth or the roar itself caused the icicles to fall, or even if it was caused by the gas explosion.

The very fact that the icicles were shattered into tiny pieces testified to the ferocity of the explosion.

The judges were probably stunned by this scene unfolding before their eyes.

Hence they hesitated briefly before announcing the end of the match.

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"Congratulations on your victory, Honoka."

Shizuku, who had returned to their room first, congratulated Honoka, who was fresh from her post-event medical examination.

"Thank you...... It was a nice try, Shizuku."

"Yeah...... But I can't accept it."

Her soft words would likely prompt some people to suspect: "Is that true?" But Honoka was her close friend from childhood, and there was no way she could misinterpret Shizuku's meaning.

"Shizuku......"

Honoka wrapped her arms around the slightly shorter Shizuku and pulled her into a hug.

Arms dangling, Shizuku dove into Honoka's embrace.

"Even though I never thought I had a chance from the beginning."

"Really......"

"But, there was nothing I could do."

"..........."

"I still can't let it go, Honoka......"

"......You gave it your all."

This persisted for some time.

"......Thanks. I'm OK now."

Shizuku said as she separated from Honoka.

There were no tear tracks on her face.

"Is that so......? Shizuku, want to grab some tea? I'm a little hungry."

"......OK."

"Give me a second to change, alright?"

Shizuku smiled in embarrassment and nodded as she watched Honoka's sunny attitude.

The moment Honoka stepped into the cafeteria, she was immediately caught between a rock and a hard place and struck immobile.

She locked gazes with Miyuki, who had arrived beforehand.

They couldn't just retreat like this, but even so, it's not like they could just nonchalantly sit down next to her. This terrible situation almost caused Honoka to burst into tears.

"Congratulations on your victory, Honoka."

While Miyuki's warm smile was no less brilliant than usual, there was still a little stiffness in her upper lip. They were unable to "act normally" and, while there were some degrees of difference, Miyuki was no exception to this either.

"Honoka, congratulations."

If Honoka hesitated now or put on a stilted smile, this would only worsen the mood. In order to deny her that opportunity, Tatsuya immediately addressed her in his usual tone and simultaneously dispelled the awkward atmosphere around them. However, by doing so he also cut off Honoka's path of egress.

"Ah, err, thank you very much......"

"Tatsuya-kun, may we sit with you?"

Shizuku broke the ice here.

"Of course, please do."

Tatsuya said as he rose and stepped behind an empty chair. Miyuki picked up the teacups and moved the tray before sitting down in an adjacent seat from her previous position opposite Tatsuya.

"Please."

"Thank you."

Shizuku didn't hesitate and sat down in the chair Tatsuya pulled out for her — directly across from Miyuki.

Honoka blushed as Tatsuya did the same for her and sat down.

After Honoka and Shizuku ordered a cake set from the waitress that just happened to pass by, Tatsuya once again looked over the two of them.

"This one's on me. Let's call this the celebration for taking First and Second Place."

"Eh, really?"

"......Then, I'll do just that."

While Honoka hesitated briefly, Shizuku merely nodded in acceptance. She seemed to comprehend that Tatsuya's real intention was to console her, so there was no reason to refuse.

Seeing her friend rebound faster than she expected, Honoka breathed a sigh of relief and finally focused her attention on her own situation.

"Um, well......"

"Hm?"

"Well, I was able to win all thanks to Tatsuya-kun! Thank you so much!"

After all the attention was drawn back to herself, Honoka faltered even more than earlier when she realized that she hadn't thanked Tatsuya for everything yet. She was finally able to deftly do so after great personal difficulty.

Seeing her like this, Tatsuya smiled and nodded his head.

"Just a little."

He wasn't being humble nor was he denying her words, he just didn't want to blow it out of proportion. Honoka didn't take issue with the words "just a little" probably because she understood the meaning behind his smile.

After verifying this, Tatsuya wiped away his smile and turned his gaze on Shizuku.

"However, I do need to apologize to Shizuku."

"Eh?"

Shizuku stared at Tatsuya with a "I have no idea what you're talking about" expression.

"Disregarding the final outcome, this could have turned into a more even contest...... My estimation was too naive. It was too strenuous a demand for you to completely master 'Phonon Maser' in two short weeks."

"Ah, that...... No, that's not Tatsuya-kun's fault at all. Also, without that, I would have had no chance to retaliate at all."

Fully comprehending why Tatsuya was apologizing, Shizuku vigorously shook her head.

"It was my fault I couldn't control it. I should be the one apologizing. If I could wield it at will, that would have made for a much better match. As an inept opponent, I also extend my apologies to Miyuki as well."

"Please don't be like that. At the time, I was very surprised. You were able to use such an advanced magic ability while dual-wielding CADs at the same time."

Miyuki smiled and shook her head. Afterwards, she teasingly glared at Tatsuya.

"Onii-sama, were you really trying to make me lose?"

At this fairly complex to answer question, Tatsuya immediately responded.

"......I just wanted the both of you to bring out your maximum potential."

And the result was this dignified but brilliant rejoinder.

Pompous, but it was no lie.

Miyuki knew this very well, but understanding this was one thing, being satisfied with this answer was another thing altogether.

"Seriously...... Does this person not care about his own sister?"

"I do believe you would be truly indignant if I went easy on you."

Anyone could encounter their friend teasing an older sibling, but this was an extremely rare occurrence for Miyuki. Her words not only brought about Tatsuya's rebuttal, they also caused Honoka and Shizuku to burst into laughter.

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It was the seventh day of the Nine Schools Competition and the fourth day of the Newcomers Division.

Today was the preliminaries of the Newcomers Division Monolith Code event, which was widely regarded as the most important event within the Nine Schools Competition. Yet, the audience's attention was completely concentrated on Mirage Bat.

Since this was an event that only young ladies participated in, their uniforms consisted of colorful spandex that was covered by flowing miniskirts and sleeveless vests or jackets. When compared to the fashion show (cosplay contest?) that Women's Icicle Destruction presented, this was another feast for the eyes of a different caliber.

Rather, the young women in these uniforms were dancing through the skies.

In terms of sheer beauty, this event was undoubtedly first among all magic competitions.

Thus, it was perfectly natural to receive massive attention (and scrutiny) from the male fans.

That being said — if this wasn't Tatsuya's mental reaction, he felt that he was also the subject of many a curious gaze.

This was no lustful gaze that he was fighting against, but the collective (prickly) hostile gazes filled with enmity.

"......You're certainly dimwitted when it comes to your own affairs."

The player that completed her preparations for the first match spoke to Tatsuya in a teasing manner.

"While I don't deny that I'm a little slow in some regards...... You have some idea, Satomi?"

"Of course!"

She was Satomi Subaru from First High 1st Year Class D, and, of course, a Course 1 student. Satomi was actually her surname, as the two of them were not close enough for Tatsuya to call her by her actual name.

"Everyone came to see Shiba-kun."

She was a young lady that was somewhat similar to Mari. To be precise, they were both more popular among their own gender than with those of the opposite gender.

However, at the end of the day, they were only "somewhat" similar. Also, if the two of them stood side by side, they would still give off different impressions to others.

Let's assume both were dressed in swallowtail suits.

Mari would give off a "beautiful lady dressed in men's clothes" vibe.

While Subaru would definitely categorize as a "beautiful young man from the troupers".

Regretfully, that was probably their defining difference.

It remained a mystery as to whether Subaru was conscious of this point, but it was true that her tone and mannerisms had a masculine tinge to them.

Even so, this was hardly a "rude" impression, but as her previous words implied, she was an extremely perceptive young lady.

"In both Speed Shooting and the subsequent Icicle Destruction, we seized all three of the top spots. I think anyone watching could see that highly efficient CAD software played an integral part in that. That's why everyone wants to know who the technician responsible is."

"......But, anyone can find out who the technician on duty is without much research."

"That's true. Shiba-kun, the other schools are now very wary of you."

If what Subaru said was true — and there was no reason to think otherwise — then things were rapidly progressing in the direction that Tatsuya wanted to see the least.

Generally, people are forced to act in conditions where they are not fully prepared. That's just "how life works".

Despite that, he was woefully unprepared for this situation.

According to the plan, "Shiba Tatsuya" was only supposed to be revealed post graduation.

"Then...... It's my turn to take this by storm. Honestly, with this CAD in hand, there's no reason I can be defeated in the preliminaries."

As she paced continuously towards the entrance, Subaru raised her right arm with a "bracelet" that seemed to flash in the sunlight. Over one shoulder, she revealed a daring smile.

Tatsuya gave her a thumbs up and watched her depart.

As she said herself, Subaru was practically guaranteed to triumph in the preliminaries.

Using the CAD he calibrated.

While he didn't want to be in the public eye so much, he couldn't exactly just mail it in either.

As a Course 2 student — as a Weed in the system, nobody save for one person placed high expectations on him, but now he was out of options.

Now, he had Mayumi and Mari who nominated him for the Nine Schools Competition, Katsuto who supported this decision, Hattori who backed him despite his own personal feelings and Kirihara who was willing to be a guinea pig despite the danger. Then there were Honoka, Shizuku, and all the other female players who were depending on him as well as — and Miyuki, who unconditionally believed and supported him.

Once entwined, these social links could not be so easily "dissolved", even by him.

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Mirage Bat involved four people at a time in the preliminary round, with the six victors from each round advancing to the next round.

Even though this was the event in the Nine Schools Competition with the least amount of matches, this did not imply that this was an easier task for the players.

Taking into consideration that there were three rounds, each lasting 15 minutes at a time, this was the longest event in the Nine Schools Competition. Including the five minute breaks spaced between, the event could last approximately one hour. Compared to Icicle Destruction and Monolith Code that had no time restrictions, this was an especially long duration.

Also, during the match itself, the players had to use sustainable magic and continuously leap into the air. The stress placed on the players themselves easily rivaled that of a marathon.

And to top it all off, there were two matches in one day alone.

In terms of physical stamina, this was a more punishing event than Crowd Ball or Monolith Code.

With the players' exhaustion in mind, there was a large interval for resting between the preliminary and elimination rounds, which could be said to be a unique feature of this event.

The first match was set at 8 AM. With two arenas going at the same time, the preliminaries would be finished around noon.

The elimination round would start at 7 PM. This was the only night time event in the entire Nine Schools Competition.

Some may question why the Nine Schools Competition forced the preliminary and elimination rounds into one day rather than splitting them across two days. There was, of course, a method to the madness.

Mirage Bat was an event that involved swinging a bat towards the orb-shaped holograms (Strictly speaking, they were three dimensional orb images. Modern imaging techniques technically possessed fundamental differences with holograms). In other words, the player had to identify the illusion floating ten meters off the ground while still grounded, otherwise there was no way to complete the event. This event was not suited to be conducted under the burning sun. Hence an airship was deployed during the third match to avoid letting the sun interfere with the event.

Mirage Bat was designed to be conducted during night time.

In order to avoid letting the players' bodies cover the projecting lights, the 3D projector was set atop the cylindrical light towers that surrounded the arena. From this alone, one could fully understand this was intended to be a night event.

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After the end of the second match — as expected, both Honoka and Subaru advanced — Tatsuya was headed back to his room to take a quick nap.

The two players had already returned to their rooms and were sound asleep.

In this event, restoring lost stamina was absolutely critical.

As the technician, Tatsuya didn't need to rest physically, but this was a good opportunity to relax his nerves. He toyed with the idea of using the Sleeping Docks, but elected to yield that to the players first and returned to his room, pulled the curtains, and lay on the bed.

Right now, the third match of Mirage Bat was progressing. He was very fortunate to be assigned the first and second matches. Even though it was only one more hour, this hour had a huge impact on refreshing himself mentally and physically.

He also wished that Miyuki's Official Division preliminary was early as well, but that was out of his hands. Tatsuya abandoned that thought after taking into account how meaningless that consideration was.

His physical body wasn't tired, so he didn't have to force himself to sleep, but allowed his mind to wander.

As he lay on the bed with his eyes closed, Tatsuya thought back to the scene from yesterday morning.

Ichijou Masaki and Kichijouji Shinkurou — while they were of the same age as he was, they were both prodigies that were renowned in the world of magic.

Ichijou Masaki — Three years ago, when the Great Asian Alliance invaded Okinawa, the New Soviet Union also took military action on Sado, where the young man of a mere 13 years volunteered for the front lines and, alongside the current head of the Ichijou Family, Ichijou Tsuyoshi, used "Rupture" to annihilate many enemy soldiers. He was a Magician who possessed live combat experience.

While the scale of the battle was quite small (to this day, the New Soviet Union denies their connection with the militants that invaded Sado), he was awarded the title "the Crimson Prince of the Ichijou Family" for his exploits. (Here, "Crimson" praised him for the fact that "he was bathed in blood and fought to the last" rather than being a derogatory "bloodthirsty" label.)

Kichijouji Shinkurou — A genius Magician that identified the "Cardinal Code", which had only existed in theory, at age 13. Based on his surname Kichijouji and the "Cardinal Code" he discovered, he was given the title

"Cardinal George" and was held to be one of the rising stars behind theoretical Magic Sequences who were known throughout the field.

The fact that both of them registered at the same school in the same cohort was a coincidence that bordered on criminal.

For the two of them to team up during Monolith Code was already an invincible combination, at least for the Newcomers Division.

Morisaki and company deserved to be pitied. Tatsuya viewed things that were not connected to him more mercifully.

If only there was some way to close the gap.

("Rupture" is a magic that possesses A-Rank destructive power...... Maybe.)

The Ichijou Family's far-famed ability "Rupture" was a Dispersal-Systematic Magic that vaporized all fluids within the target's body.

Once the fluids from a biological target were vaporized, the body would tear apart.

For internal combustible machines, once the fuel evaporated, the car would immediately explode. This was also the case for battery liquid. Even if there were no flammable liquids on board, there was still engine oil, lubricants, coolant. There was practically no machine that didn't use some sort of fluid. Thus, as long as "Rupture" was activated, the Ichijous could destroy any machine at will.

This was the perfect magic for both anti-personnel and anti-armor combat. "Rupture" was designed solely for military use, so naturally it infringed upon the rules for Monolith Code.

(That being said, he is still the next head of house for one of the Ten Master Clans and possesses the proud title "Crimson Prince", so he wouldn't just rely on "Rupture" as his trump card...... Speaking of which...)

He shifted his thoughts from two people who signed up for Monolith Code and declared war in front of him to the Monolith Code event itself.

He didn't have to devote all his energy into creating countermeasures for Third High yet.

Right now, First High's second match was about to start.

(They already took the first match and the second match is against the lowly Fourth High. Even they can't screw this up that bad......)

Tatsuya's eyes remained closed as he surrendered to his drowsiness and drifted off to sleep.

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Tatsuya woke up shortly after noon and headed for the competition area, only to find the area covered by a rattled atmosphere.

Scratch that, it was a complete state of panic that enveloped the pavilions.

First High's pavilion was the center of it all.

"Onii-sama!"

The moment he stepped into the pavilion, Miyuki ran over to him as if this was a predetermined event. Shizuku was right alongside her.

"Miyuki...... Shizuku too, weren't you two with Erika's group?"

According to the plan, before Honoka got up — she had to prepare for the finals around 5 PM — Miyuki and Shizuku should have been watching Monolith Code with Erika and the others.

Yet, the two of them were here, which implied that......

"What's going on? Did something happen during Monolith Code?"

Without waiting for an answer, Tatsuya immediately followed up with another question.

There was no reason to ask if something had occurred, the very mood testified that an incident occurred.

Tatsuya had an inkling that this was likely worse than he had feared.

"Yes, there was an accident, but......"

"Miyuki, that was no accident!"

As Miyuki hesitated to speak, Shizuku forcefully overrode her words as she interrupted.

"That was intentionally overkill. It was blatantly against the rules."

Although she kept a tight rein on her tone, Shizuku's eyes betrayed her fury.

"Shizuku...... This is not the best time to make wild accusations. We don't have proof that Fourth High intentionally did this."

"Indeed, Kitayama-san."

Behind them, Mayumi interjected into the conversation.

"It is hard to imagine that this was purely an accident...... Even so, we cannot jump to the conclusion that this was premeditated. If we hurl suspicions around blindly, some people who do not know any better may assume that's the truth."

This may be a little impolite, but that was certainly a worthy argument from the upperclassman leadership.

As he saw Shizuku reflect upon that gentle reprimand, Tatsuya also thought, "The President does have a few tricks up her sleeve".
......Unfortunately, Mayumi immediately squinted at him from the side.

"......Is there a problem?"

"......You were just thinking something impolite, weren't you?"

(H-how sharp......!)

Tatsuya faltered slightly at how adeptly she saw through him.

Still, when he stood there, his life experiences belied his actual physical appearance.

"No, I was just thinking, as expected of the Student Council President......"

He wore a mask of honesty and feigned that he was being unjustly suspected in order to carefully gauge her reaction.

"......Is that so?"

While her eyes remained suspicious, Mayumi reined herself in at least. Not only was she unable to find any chinks in Tatsuya's acting, she also felt this wasn't the right time to pursue this issue.

"Then, what's our injury situation?"

"So you realized from the conversation alone that Morisaki-kun and the others are injured......"

Mayumi sighed, her expression had "what a troublesome issue" written all over her face.

"......They are seriously injured. The event was held in an urban setting and they were crushed beneath the rubble from a ruined building that crumbled when the attacks from 'Battering Ram' struck."

"......If used against people in closed environments, the magic "Battering Ram" rates as A-rank in destructive power. This is on a completely different level than the danger encountered during Battle Board and is a blatant violation of the rules."

The "Battering Ram" that the two were speaking of was also known as "Point Burst", which was a magic developed through PK research. This magic functions by rewriting the Eidos of the target object and applying a massive Weight-Type Magic on a single point. When used against buildings, the target requirement was usually a wall or the ceiling, or at least a "single surface" that was separated from any pillars and also required a colossal magic capacity as well as high interference strength.

If simply destroying a building was the goal, it was more efficient to use Move-Type Magic and sling a hammer around. In comparison, "Battering Ram" was a highly demanding magic that, besides BS Magicians, was not something that could be casually treated like a toy.

"Agreed...... Even if they were wearing military-use protective equipment, that's not going to help against tons of rocks and dirt falling on top of you. Thanks to the protective helmets and the observers casting Light Weight Magic in time, disaster was averted...... The three of them have undergone magic healing, but even then this will take two weeks. They are confined to bed for the next three days."

Still, Mayumi avoided making a judgment on whether the accident was truly intentional and subtly altered the direction of the conversation.

"......It's more serious than I imagined."

Tatsuya could sympathize with Mayumi's stance on not voicing an opinion and thus avoiding the need to pursue the issue.

"Indeed. This may be a little rash, but once I saw the magic healers going, that was a horrible sight."

Just as she said, this was a somewhat harsh opinion regarding the injured members.

At any rate, the fact that Mayumi faltered so badly was also a clear indication that she was probably not on guard against Tatsuya.

"Wait, I'm still unclear on this point. Were all three in the same building?"

This may not have been a matter Tatsuya needed to worry about, but in Monolith Code, the typical strategy called for either one person on the attack and two on the defense or vice versa. Tatsuya had a hard time figuring out what situation would call for all three members of the team to be struck down by the same attack.

"They immediately suffered a surprise attack once the match was under way. It wasn't that they couldn't find anyone before the start signal, but it was that they didn't have a chance to. Setting aside 'Battering Ram' for now, there's no question that jumping the gun is a clear violation of the rules."

The one who answered was the fuming Shizuku.

"I see...... In that case, then the board will be busy too."

"Because they weren't able to prevent it...... Right?"

Seeing Tatsuya grin evilly, Miyuki tilted her head as she asked in confusion.

Miyuki was too sincere and honest to comprehend Tatsuya's twisted line of logic.

"This isn't anything too important. Rather, setting an easily destructible ruin as the starting location was one of the key causes of this accident — we'll call it an accident for now. The board may elect to scrap Monolith Code from the Newcomers Division altogether."

"......That's also true."

Miyuki nodded in profound agreement to Tatsuya's reasoning. At this time, Mayumi jumped back in.

"There are indeed calls for a halt to this. However, the ending result is that the preliminaries are still going on for all the schools besides us and Fourth High. The worst case scenario is that our school will be treated as withdrawn from the second round of the preliminaries."

Hearing Mayumi's words, it was Tatsuya's turn to turn his head.

"What do you mean worst case scenario? The players are unable to compete any longer, so aside from withdrawing, I don't see any other options......"

"On this point, Juumonji-kun is currently negotiating with the board."

"Really......"

After the commencement of the Nine Schools Competition, changing players was forbidden. In other words, since the other side violated the rules, they were going to request an exception?

Even so, the Monolith Code team members consisted of the 1st Year male students with the top three magic technical scores. Even if they found replacements, victory remained elusive. Rather than looking for replacements, a better option would be an unorthodox request to remove the scores from Monolith Code from the aggregate score. Behind these vague responses, Tatsuya made this consideration.

Naturally, Mayumi had no idea what dark plots were running through Tatsuya's mind.

"—Tatsuya-kun, I wish to speak with you."

Mayumi's voice contained coquettish overtones. She must be thoroughly unnerved by this chain of accidents and was subconsciously looking for something or someone to rely on.

At practically the same time, his sister fixed a burning gaze on Tatsuya. He really wanted to dig a hole and hide as he thought "I didn't do it, don't glare at me, why aren't you glaring at Mayumi?". But there was no way he would be caught dead saying that.

"Can you come with me for a moment?"

Does this mean she was worried about other people overhearing their private conversation?

The burning gaze doubled in intensity, but Tatsuya feigned ignorance as he followed right behind Mayumi.

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Although they were inside the pavilion with a wall separating them from the outside, it was only made of cloth after all. From this perspective, this served as a poor sound barrier.

Yet, this was the realm of magic that reversed the laws of reality. Mayumi slowly built up a magical barrier that prevented their voices from traveling outside.

"Quite the perfect sound barrier."

"Really......? Hm hm, thank you."

Mayumi sat down with a slightly embarrassed expression while Tatsuya also pulled up a chair and sat.

"Then, let's cut to the chase......"

"Very well."

"............"

Even though Mayumi claimed time was of the essence, she refrained from speaking. Since the two of them alone would arouse all sorts of problems, Tatsuya finally opened up.

"You suspect that this accident is also related to the previous sabotage incident?"

"......Yes. On that topic, I would like to hear Tatsuya-kun's opinion. Tatsuya-kun mentioned before that Mari's incident had a high probability of the CAD being tampered with, right?"

Mayumi finally worked up the courage to ask, to which Tatsuya nodded and replied: "Yes."

"If they were using the same tactic this time, that would fully explain Fourth High's actions...... How do you think we should go about proving this?"

"Our only option is to catch them red handed, all other options are not viable."

"Can't we...... Borrow Fourth High's CADs and look them over?"

"This would be fine if traces of the rewritten Activation Sequence remained...... But given the ominous silence from the already disqualified Seventh High, this seems unlikely."

"Really......"

Mayumi's gaze dropped down to her ten interlaced fingers on the table top.

Tatsuya watched her pose and considered that he caused her some disappointment here. Mayumi didn't raise her eyes and continued asking.

"......If this played out according to Tatsuya-kun's assumptions and our school is the subject of sabotage...... What do you think the motive is? Vengeance? Revenge for the incident in spring?"

So that's the real item that Mayumi was concerned about, Tatsuya thought.

Tatsuya possessed the intelligence in his hands to dispel this concern. He knew that this situation was not caused by remnants of "Blanche", the terrorist organization that they shattered, or any related organizations. If he revealed everything that he knew, he would be able to alleviate Mayumi's anxiety.

Yet, whether revealing everything was truly the best choice, he hesitated briefly over this decision.

"......This is unrelated to the incident in spring."

Finally, Tatsuya elected to play one card from his hand.

"Eh? What makes you say that?"

Mayumi quickly raised her head and asked back, her voice betraying her hopes and prayers that he had some basis for saying so.

Tatsuya possessed the power to realize that hope. At the same time, he was denied the option of laying everything out on the table.

"The day before commencement...... No, the date had already changed. At any rate, the night before the opening ceremony, several miscreants sought to infiltrate the dorms. There were a total of three, each equipped with firearms."

"......That's the first I've heard of this!"

"That's because a gag order has been issued. By pure coincidence, I was on station when this occurred and may have supplied some assistance...... I also have some passing familiarity with their background. The ones who struck at this year's Nine Schools Competition appear to be a criminal organization out of Hong Kong."

The classified portions were filled in with a few white lies.

Mayumi didn't suspect his words at all.

"This time may have been coincidental...... But please refrain from such dangerous behavior in the future."

"If pressed for an answer, I feel that I'm always getting dragged into things."

Mayumi gazed suspiciously at Tatsuya shrugging his shoulders. But, as she quickly realized, this wasn't the time for that.

"OK...... Haven't you been asked to keep this under wraps? Thank you for telling me."

"In return, please don't let this spread."

"I know. I promise."

Mayumi raised her right hand as if she were solemnly swearing a vow.

At this perfectly natural yet mischievous action, Tatsuya almost burst into laughter.

"......Even though I know I shouldn't say this but I still want to say, I feel a lot more relaxed."

"......Indeed, those words cannot be heard anywhere else."

"No worries. I only say that in front of Tatsuya."

Keh, how should he interpret that? Tatsuya agonized over that point.

Don't tell me that she was linking this back to the "trustworthy little brother" line from several days ago?

As usual, Mayumi's thought pattern remained a complete mystery to Tatsuya.

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"What's the situation?"

"Just as planned. First High will have to withdraw from Monolith Code."

Yokohama, China Street, the highest floor in some hotel. Five men were seated around a round table with tea sets in a large room chiefly decorated in red and gold.

On the wall, there were images of a dragon in flight sewn with gold thread.

"Monolith Code is the single most valuable event. Even though the Newcomers Division is only worth half the points from the Official Division, this is still a major blow."

The men nodded with smiles plastered on their faces. However, their pallor was terrible and every one of their smiles was forced.

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Afterwards, Mayumi requested: "In order to avoid panic from spreading throughout the 1st Year female students, I'm counting on your support." Tatsuya remained in the pavilion...... Except he had no clue how to accomplish this.

He felt that it was the duty of the female upperclassmen to care for the mental status of their female underclassmen.

He deeply regretted his lackadaisical acceptance of this charge, so while he wore an expression that claimed "nothing had happened", he devoted himself thoroughly to CAD calibration for the upcoming events.

That was all he did, but for some reason, he became surrounded by the 1st Year female players.

This may simply be because Miyuki, who was one of the leaders of the 1st Year female players, stuck to him like glue. Initially, Tatsuya thought this was the case but unfortunately, he was not dull enough to believe this without question.

Their eyes were actually focused entirely on him.

These were not flirtatious looks. He was not narcissistic enough to misinterpret that, nor was he wilted enough to be able to not notice them.

At the same time, he was slightly bemused as to the exact meaning behind them — that was the only area where he was slow in.

Completely besieged by these silent gazes, this was an irritating condition to work under, but it's not like he could shoo them away either.

He refrained from engaging in conversation not because he was hindered by them. Lacking any other options, he elected to ignore them and adopt his usual procedure of silently continuing his work.

An eternally unchanging appearance.

An eternally enduring object.

He had no idea what value this possessed.

For someone who had always labored under restrictive conditions and was well aware of the intermittent nature of the world like Tatsuya, few things were truly eternal.

Even so, the young ladies quieted down gradually as they watched him work as if nothing had happened. All of this Miyuki beheld with her own eyes as she nodded in place of her brother and revealed a satisfied smile.

The greatest beneficiary from his normalcy — or even feigned normalcy — and its ensuing effect, was actually Honoka.

Initially, after hearing the "incident" surrounding Morisaki and the others, her face had turned completely pale. Yet, after watching Tatsuya plug away and attend the tactical meeting as if nothing had occurred, she gradually settled down as well.

The change was so complete that now Tatsuya was the uneasy one.

"There are no strategic adjustments from the preliminary round. In the end, Mirage Bat is a test of stamina."

Still, even if he felt uneasy, there was nothing he could do at this point.

The match was about to begin. He was pressed for time at the moment, so he could only table his unease and focus his concentration on the battle ahead.

"Avoid getting into a battle of attrition. The only thing you need to do is calmly make any necessary adjustments."

Under Tatsuya's watching gaze, Subaru nodded in an exaggerated fashion.

"Honoka, don't expend energy on excess techniques. Just as we practiced, there are fakes created from illusion magic that serve to waste your stamina."

Forewarned, it was Honoka's turn to nod.

"The only thing the two of you should be thinking is how to release your specialties to the fullest. Don't worry, know that we already own First and Second place right here."

At Tatsuya's daring proclamation of victory, both of them nodded in delight.

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While it was the height of summer, the longest days had already passed.

By 7 PM, the sun had long since set and the blue sky had been replaced by the hanging stars.

The surface of the lake reflected the overhanging starlight, causing the entire scene to flash brilliantly.

Among the stars, six young ladies stood on several raised pillars.

The thin uniforms that traced their figures did not include any amazing accessories or designs, but over the shimmering waves, they gave off an almost fey like aura. —That's why there were a lot of male fans flooding the stands.

Mirage Bat used special bats to strike away at the projections that floated 10 meters above the ground, with the highest total determining the victor.

While they said strike, in reality there was no sense of impact nor did the orbs shatter into pieces.

The reason behind this was because the bats in the players' hands would interact with the CAD and release a signal at the same location as the projections. Once they overlapped, the orb projections would automatically terminate upon registering the impacting signal and add the score to the striking player's column.

Winning this event required two skills.

The ability to swiftly leap to the same height as the floating projections.

And the ability to even more hastily locate each and every orb's location.

Of the two, it was the second that could be easily and unexpectedly overlooked. Since nothing was faster than light, immediately taking off after verifying the projection location was usually the swiftest choice. But — there were a few exceptions.

There were a few milliseconds of delay before the projection materialized in the air. If someone could detect the oscillations of the light waves even an instant earlier, they would be able to move towards the location of the light waves before the orb had even formed.

Honoka was extremely adept at reading light waves – strictly speaking, the subtle changes in the Eidos of the light waves. This gave her a tremendous advantage during the elimination round.

The instant before the red orb materialized, Honoka had already activated her magic.

The other players could only watch helplessly as she seized the initiative.

The next orb materialized.

The color was blue. That color was lit for the longest time, so they were the easiest points to score.

Five players started their Activation Sequences.

The first into the air was Subaru.

Everyone started their Activation Sequence at the same time, but the first two to finish them were the players from First High.

Compared to the players in the event, it was the technicians on the outer perimeter that were furious at this outcome.

Since the difference was so splendidly displayed before their eyes, they were forced to admit the cause was the differences in CAD performance.

Since every school had an upper ceiling in terms of machinery, there was no significant difference in hardware capability.

Thus, the only difference lay in software performance.

In other words, the strength of the technician.

"Damn it! How can he fit such a complicated action into such a tiny Activation Sequence!"

Someone choked out in the back. They were probably using a Kirlian filter (a filter that could bring the psion density and activity into the visible spectrum) to take pictures of Honoka and Subaru activating and processing (from the start of the Activation Sequence to the beginning of the processing phase).

They leaped straight into the air — completely ignoring the effects of gravitational deceleration — towards the projections, stopped at the orbs, then immediately returned along the same axis after scoring the point and landed after expending all inertia.

Throughout this chain of movements, regardless of whether it was Honoka or Subaru, they never manipulated the CAD once. In other words, everything from the player leaping into the sky thanks to the Activation Sequence onward was completely written into the CAD.

The smaller the Activation Sequence, the faster the processing speed.

Likewise, the less Activation Sequences that needed to be processed, the less strain was placed on the player as well.

They were using the minimal Magic Power to accomplish phenomenon rewriting at the fastest possible speed.

"It's as if we're up against Taurus Silver himself out here!"

No one knew who made that comment in the ensuing ruckus.

"A-chan, what's wrong......?"

Azusa turned around to find Mayumi studying her strangely. Studying the wide-eyed, petrified her.

"No...... It's nothing."

Seeing Azusa curl into a ball, Mayumi replied with an "Is that so?", and turned back to observing the contest.

Azusa's reaction was well within the normal boundaries of her behavior, so there probably wasn't anything to it.

However, what was different was that something other than her usual embarrassment currently captured her heart.

(......As if, we're up against "Taurus Silver"?)

Somewhere, someone made that complaint.

Mixed into the middle of all the shrieks of delight and dismay, for some reason these particular words wormed their way into Azusa's ears.

(That fully manual Activation Sequence adjustment...... Connecting the main systems from the Generalized model to the subsystems of the Specialized model is the current cutting edge research...... The ability to use Loop Cast on Generalized CADs...... "Inferno"...... "Phonon Maser"...... "Niflheim"...... Every one of these are high class magics that have never had their Activation Sequences published......)

For someone who was also aiming to become a Magic Artificer, Azusa started thinking back on each tour de force that shocked the crowd time and time again.

(As if? We're up against Taurus Silver?

No, that...... If it wasn't Taurus Silver himself, this is simply impossible......)

— I wonder how shocking it would be if he turned out to be a Japanese teenager like us —

Suddenly, his voice rang out through Azusa's memories.

"......What's the matter? If you're not feeling well, go take a break!"

"No, really, it's nothing......"

Mayumi's anxious and concerned gaze was drawn towards Azusa who had suddenly leapt out of her seat. Yet, Azusa was beyond caring at this point.

The words that clearly rang out from her recollection. Maybe, that wasn't a guess at all......

(How is it possible? How is it possible how is it possible? How is it possible how is it possible how is it possible?)

Those words occupied all of Azusa's consciousness.

Far away from those troubled thoughts, two of her underclassmen raced out to a dominating lead to greet the end of the first session.

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In the end, Mirage Bat for the Newcomers Division turned out just as Tatsuya predicted, with Honoka and Subaru in sole possession of First and Second Place. Immediately after the end of the match, Tatsuya was summoned to the conference room without any opportunity to partake in the fruits of victory.

Inside, the upperclassmen waiting for Tatsuya were wholly unlike his (female) peers who were delirious with joy, upperclassmen who were the utter masters of their emotions and hid them beneath solemn expressions.

Mayumi, Mari, Katsuto, Suzune, Hattori, Azusa.

Everyone from high command in First High was present.

In addition, Kirihara and Isori were also on the flanks.

Given that team members just suffered serious injuries, it was only natural that they could not appear delighted, but even so their expressions were a little stiff — as if dreading what was coming next. Especially Hattori, who apparently was at wit's end about what expression to adopt, so he chose to form a mask with his own face, with a thoroughly ill at ease expression.

This could not turn out well, so Tatsuya mentally fortified himself.

"Good work. Thanks to you, we obtained a far better result than any we could've hoped for."

Mayumi used a normal — more like official — choice of words.

Before she said this, Tatsuya's keen senses picked up how she and Katsuto exchanged a glance in a blink of an eye.

"That's all thanks to the players' diligence."

Tatsuya also replied back in a vague fashion. He hadn't felt this sort of tense atmosphere since he first enrolled here.

"Of course, credit is due to Mitsui-san and Satomi-san as well as all the other students who tirelessly trained to achieve this result.

However, everyone acknowledges that Tatsuya-kun's contribution is nothing short of outstanding.

We didn't suffer a single setback in any of the three events you were responsible for...... In terms of points, the fact that we are guaranteed at least Second Place in the Newcomers Division is all thanks to Tatsuya-kun."

"......Thank you very much."

Tatsuya executed a short and prudent bow.

They kept their eyes from matching as they waited for the other person to speak. Yet, Mayumi didn't cut to the chase.

Tatsuya slowly raised his eyes to find Mayumi using her eyes to stop Katsuto.

There appeared to be something difficult to speak of that Katsuto wanted to clarify.

What was it that warranted such a level of indecision?

Finally noticing that Tatsuya was intently watching her, Mayumi seemed to cave and briefly shut her eyes.

"As I said earlier, even if we withdrew from Monolith Code, we are still guaranteed Second Place in the Newcomers Division. Right now, there's a 50 point difference between First High and Third High. If Third High takes Second Place or higher in Monolith Code, they would take First Place overall in the Newcomers Division. We would retain First Place if they only achieve Third Place or below."

This way, there wouldn't be a huge gap in the rankings for the Newcomers Division, which was Tatsuya's objective all along for the combined score.

So what were they so anxious about?

Also, why was he summoned in the first place?

Tatsuya was also starting to fret now.

"Before the Newcomers Division, didn't we assume this would be enough......"

Mayumi could already detect his growing displeasure from his voice. In the midst of her suppressed expression, there were hints of a slightly harried look. What came out was an anxious, frantic voice.

"Since we've come so far,"

Even so, she wasn't settling down to re-examine the situation, but rushing for the finish line.

At this point, Tatsuya finally realized what they were going to ask of him.

"We wish to charge for First Place overall in the Newcomers Division."

At some point, Mayumi's tone had reverted to her normal level.

"Are you aware that Third High is dispatching Ichijou Masaki and Kichijouji Shinkurou for Monolith Code?"

At Mayumi's question, Tatsuya replied with a succinct "Yes".

"Exactly...... Setting aside Ichijou-kun for the moment, Tatsuya-kun may know more about the details surrounding Kichijouji-kun. With those two teaming up, the chances of them being upset in the elimination round is extremely remote. If we withdraw from Monolith Code, our chances of triumphing in the Newcomers Division vanish as well."

So, they wanted him—

"So Tatsuya-kun...... May we rely on you to replace Morisaki-kun and the others in Monolith Code?"

—The "thing" that Mayumi wanted him to do coincided exactly with what Tatsuya surmised.

"......May I ask two questions?"

"Of course, what is it?"

He was already 90% certain, but this was a good opportunity to verify things, Tatsuya thought.

"There are still two matches in the preliminary round that have been extended until tomorrow, correct?"

"Yes, you're right. Owing to this, tomorrow's schedule will change as well."

"I thought that replacing players are forbidden even if the starters suffered injuries?"

"After carefully considering the situation, a special exception was made."

What an unsurprising answer.

Still, even if all these answers were anticipated, accepting them was an entirely different story.

"......Why me?"

This was no question, but a subtle rejection in and of itself. It was just that he was facing upperclassmen, so he had to at least observe the forms and could not simply say "No".

Mayumi probably predicted that Tatsuya would answer this way and still hadn't come up with a method to persuade him, hence she kept beating around the bush. Currently, she wore a forced smile pasted on her miserable expression.

"I just thought that Tatsuya-kun was the strongest candidate......"

"Disregarding your grade in technical skills, in live combat ability alone you are undoubtedly the mightiest among the 1st Year male students."

Mari, who until this moment had left the negotiations to Mayumi, noticed that the situation was turning bleak from Mayumi's vague response, and threw her weight behind the "persuading" side.

"Monolith Code is not 'live combat' — it is a 'magic competition' where hand to hand combat is forbidden. I'm sure everyone is well aware of this without me pointing it out."

Despite this, Tatsuya still didn't capitulate.

"On magical fighting strength, I think you are also in the highest tier as well."

Mari glanced at Hattori, who knitted his brows with a thoroughly miserable expression.

This was a merciless, but effective angle of attack, so Tatsuya was forced to abandon his excuse of being "incapable". However, he still had another card up his sleeve.

"But I'm not a player. In terms of replacements, we should still have other players that have only competed in one event."

Now, even Mari was at a loss.

"Even if we ignored the pride from the Course 1 students, by grabbing a replacement 'player' from the ranks of the 'auxiliaries', you would damage the confidence of future participants as well."

This was probably the issue that was causing them the most headaches and also the one they didn't want to address.

The Newcomers Division did wonders for educating new students. Even if they triumphed this year, they could not guarantee that this would not negatively impact the Official Division in the ensuing years, which was essentially putting the cart in front of the horse.

If the replacement for one of the primary players turned out to be an auxiliary, and a Course 2 student to boot, this would have a shattering impact on not just the other players, but also the pride of the collective body of Course 1 students.

Mayumi and the others had no rejoinder for this.

He was the master of the field, Tatsuya judged. Now was the time for him to tactfully decline and bow out, and—

"Don't be naive, Shiba!"

Katsuto's booming voice rang out.

For a time, Tatsuya was unable to respond.

He was temporarily unable to discern exactly why he was being scolded.

While it was true that his words were sophistry laden with logic, it was logic nonetheless.

If they deployed him, even if victory over Third High wasn't attainable, Second Place in Monolith Code was still possible.

The difference between gold and silver in Monolith Code was a paltry 40 points. If they captured Second Place, then they would likely carry the Newcomers Division.

But in that case, no matter how you sliced it, Tatsuya would become the key contributor that made the Newcomers Division victory possible.

This would be an absolutely unacceptable result to the Course 1 students still dwelling in their elitist world. Even if he was eliminated during the preliminary round, they would not suffer a Course 2 student like him to represent them in Monolith Code.

"You are already a member of the representative team."

However, Katsuto's words fell precisely on the weakest point of Tatsuya's defense.

"Regardless of whether you are a player or auxiliary, that is not important. You are one of the 20 representatives selected out of the 200 1st Year students."

Katsuto's alternate meaning.

In other words, Tatsuya's presence had already dealt a huge blow to the Course 1 students and brought about severe shock and panic.

"In light of this emergency, our leader Saegusa has selected you as the replacement.

As a member of the team, once you have accepted this responsibility, you also have the obligation to fulfill your duty as a member."

"But......"

Even so, he still had to respond. Otherwise, they......

"As a member, you should not go against your leader's decisions.

If the judgment was erroneous, then we who aid the leadership will bring it to a halt.

Members other than ourselves have no place to object.

Indeed...... Regardless of whether it's myself, the person in question, whoever!"

Tatsuya stared at him blankly and dropped what he was going to say.

Tatsuya finally comprehended what Katsuto really wanted to express.

The message Katsuto was driving across was that regardless of who objected and regardless of what the outcome was, the brass would take full responsibility for the fallout.

"Do not cower, Shiba. Do not worry that you are a substitute. Since you have been selected, go out there and do your duty."

These words were not just restricted to the Nine Schools Competition. The Nine Schools Competition never had a replacement policy in the first place.

—Do not use your status as a Course 2 student as an escape route.

—Do not look for excuses.

—Do not put yourself in a position of weakness and wallow in despair.

Do not worry that you are a substitute — that's what this meant. Do not concern yourself with your substitute (Weed, Course 2 student) status, these are what those words entailed.

All his egress routes had been denied.

Also — since they've already gotten to this point, he had no plans to back down.

"......Understood. I shall do my best."

Mayumi and Mari both relaxed.

Katsuto solemnly nodded.

"Then, who are my teammates?"

In front of the upperclassmen, his tone was noticeably softer.

To be precise, he was intentionally using a firmer tone than usual up until now.

"That's up to you."

"Ah......?"

Tatsuya was not feigning ignorance. He was once again unable to comprehend what was being said.

"The last two members will be decided by you."

The same instructions were repeated in a different manner. Katsuto added a few words as if he had just thought of something.

"It would be best if you could decide now, but if you need some more time to consider, then come back an hour from now."

Hearing Katsuto's words, Tatsuya almost blurted out, "You're just the same."

This was the case in April when they sacked "Blanche's" base. He gave full authority to an underclassman as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

If he could avoid taking full responsibility, then this would only be a tactic to preserve himself. Yet for Katsuto, the only thing he had was responsibility here, so there's no reason he could treat this so cavalierly. Rather than calling this a byproduct of his leadership training, it may be more appropriate to say this was his nature...... Abandoning these useless thoughts, Tatsuya focused back on the topic at hand.

"No, if I just need to choose, I don't need any time......"

Tatsuya had already selected two replacements in his head from the roster.

"I just don't know if they will agree."

"Let us handle that."

......Again, refusing was not an option.

Today was the first time Tatsuya learned that the eldest son of the Juumonji Family had such a forceful personality.

"Is anyone alright? Even if I choose people from outside the team?"

Tatsuya's mood lightened considerably as if he was allowed to be as frivolous as possible.

"Eh? That's a little......"

"That's fine. This is already an unprecedented exception, so by now, no one will care if two more are added."

"Juumonji-kun......"

Mayumi helplessly glanced at Katsuto. On his part, Katsuto was wholly unperturbed by this.

"Then, I choose Yoshida Mikihiko from Class 1-E and Saijou Leonhart, also from Class 1-E."

"Hey, Shiba!?"

Hattori quickly tried to interject, but was held back by Suzune's raised hand.

"That's fine. Nakajou."

"Yes, present!"

Katsuto didn't bat an eyelid at Azusa's exaggerated response.

"Please call Yoshida Mikihiko and Saijou Leonhart here. The two of them should be at this hotel, though not with the normal cheering squads."

At first glance, he was bold and unconstrained — while this was also true, he was also someone who paid attention to the minute details. That being said, it was true that unofficial members and students that weren't part of the cheering squads and were also residing in this hotel did count as oddities. For people doing their due diligence, this was something worthy of devoting some attention to, so it was hardly surprising that he knew. Even so, Tatsuya was still impressed with Katsuto's knowledge.

"......Tatsuya-kun. Can you tell us why you chose them?"

Since she abandoned the responsibility for persuading Tatsuya to Katsuto, Mari was in no position to object at this point.

Nevertheless, she was still unable to accept this answer, maybe even suspicious that something was afoot as she asked this.

"Of course. A big reason is that I have practically not trained or interacted with any of the male team members."

Tatsuya was only responsible for calibrating the Women's team, so it was true that he had never observed any of the men practicing.

"I am utterly unfamiliar with their proficiency and weaknesses. The competition is tomorrow. It is by far too late to start investigating, devising strategies, or doing calibration."

"......Do you know these two very well?"

"Yes. We're not just in the same class — we also understand each other very well."

"Hm...... You have a point. Since we can rely on other technicians for calibration, if teammates don't understand each others' strengths and weaknesses, teamwork would become a serious issue."

As Mari considered this, she suddenly revealed a completely unexpected, mischievous expression.

"Then, that's not the biggest reason, so what is it?"

At Mari's curious question, Tatsuya didn't hesitate and immediately made a stand.

"Ability."

"Wha?"

This intrepid answer caused Mari, Mayumi, Katsuto, and Suzune to look upon Tatsuya with profound interest.

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"Hey, Tatsuya...... Is it true?"

Rather than being confused, Leo wore a forlorn expression as he repeated this question for the umpteenth time.

"Setting aside President Saegusa for the moment, do you think Group Leader Juumonji would spin such a complicated lie?"

Tatsuya was getting ready to give up answering this question.

"Even if you said setting aside the President, I still don't understand...... Oh, so it's really true."

Until now, Leo was still skeptical as he heaved a deep sigh.

To his side, Mikihiko was highly distracted as his eyes drifted, evidently unsure where to look.

"Miki, settle down a bit."

"My name is Mikihiko."

After conversing with Erika as if prearranged, a disgruntled Mikihiko sat down on the bed.

They were in Tatsuya's double room. The entire brass went and persuaded the two of them to accept — more like coerced — and Tatsuya called them over to make plans for the future.

With Erika and Mizuki following along, this does seem a little "prearranged".

Miyuki, Honoka, Shizuku were tied up by Eimi, Subaru, and their teammates and were currently locked in a spiral of "madness".

"But...... Haven't Mikihiko and I made no preparations whatsoever?"

"Exactly...... Forget about the CAD, I don't think we even have uniforms?"

Mikihiko's face was a little pale. Owing to his sudden selection, he was a little timid and mystified at his completely unexpected elevation as a Course 2 student to starter for the Newcomers Division. Not that Mikihiko would ever be caught dead admitting that.

Leo's coloring was normal, but he had shaken off his usual joking expression. He didn't look particularly energetic.

Besides Mikihiko, Tatsuya was surprised to find that even Leo was a little daunted, but he didn't choose to alter the plan of attack. Don't even dream of throwing everything to me, Tatsuya thought.

"Relax. They didn't prepare a uniform for me either."

"Wait, that's hardly a comforting thought."

Tatsuya waved his hand at Leo's ready retort.

"It'll be OK. Even if there's nothing we can do about it, just relax."

"No, that's not what I meant."

This time it was Erika's turn to snark.

Those two certainly share the same interests, Tatsuya thought.

"Fine, you're right. Honestly, that's all I can say. Don't worry about it. We've already put Nakajou-senpai in charge of the protective gear and tunics. Appearances can be pretty deceiving and she's quite a competent person. I'm sure she'll have the perfect uniforms for us."

Nobody had any comment for that. Not that anyone was going to call into question whether her competence belied her appearance.

"I'll handle the CADs. I guarantee that I'll only need an hour per person."

Completely calibrating a CAD from scratch to the point that it was customized for a Magician usually required triple the amount of the time.

Yet, neither Leo nor Mikihiko seemed particularly astounded.

On one hand, they weren't wholly aware how impressive "one hour" actually was, and on the other hand, they had already seen so many "shockers" in the past four days that they already thought "Tatsuya's omnipotent".

"Is that OK? Isn't it already 9 PM? You still need time for your gear, right?"

Erika was the only one of the four who was aware how time-consuming CAD calibration was. Thus, she was the only one looking on with concerned eyes.

"That'll be fine. I only need 10 minutes."

Looks like their worries were groundless. Once more experiencing first-hand how ridiculous he was, Erika heavily sighed.

"Ten minutes, eh, ten...... Why do I even bother worrying about you."

"Unfortunately, in reality, we don't have that much time."

"Eh?"

Erika comically portrayed a carefree expression, but upon hearing Tatsuya's bleak words, she quickly became anxious again.

"Regardless of how you describe this, we are an impromptu lineup with no tactical planning.

We have no time to practice, so we must do our fine tuning in battle.

Charging into the fray with only a rough battle plan is like heading in there blind.

For me, this is simply the last resort."

Rather than saying that Tatsuya was discouraged, it was more like he was ranting.

Erika relaxed somewhat and nodded.

"......So that's how it is. Trickery is Tatsuya-kun's specialty."

"That's going a little too far."

Tatsuya could only droop his shoulders and smile at Erika's overblown description of his shortcomings.

"Well...... It's pointless to complain any further about something that has already been decided. While Ichihara-senpai and Nakajou-senpai are scrounging up the necessary materials, let's go over our strategy."

"You were the one who said we couldn't come up with a plan."

Seeing Erika nitpicking Tatsuya's words, Mizuki barred her path with a vexed expression on her face. (She was just standing in front of her.)

"Erika-chan...... At the very least, please don't hinder Tatsuya-kun."

"Ouch! Mizuki, I was just trying to liven up this totally deadbeat~ atmosphere......"

"Yes, yes, as this deadbeat~ atmosphere is fading away, please be quiet. He already said we're running out of time, Erika."

Recently, Mizuki had finally figured out the key to dealing with her friend, so she wasn't being pulled this way and that like she was in the past.

"Hm......"

Erika puffed her cheeks at being scolded, but mercifully remained silent. No matter what she said or what attitude she adopted, she stayed because she was sincerely worried about Tatsuya, Leo, and Mikihiko.

"Our first topic is the formation itself."

Tatsuya completely ignored the interruption and kept going.

"I'm on offense, Leo is on defense, while Mikihiko will use guerrilla tactics."

"OK. But what am I supposed to do on defense?"

"I want to know too. What do you mean by guerrilla?"

At this point, Leo and Mikihiko had either accepted their fate or were earnestly getting excited. The highest probability was that they were just trying to muddle through it. Regardless of the reason behind their completely different and proactive attitude, Tatsuya continued his fluid explanation.

"The defense's job is to protect allied territory from enemy assault.

Everyone knows the victory conditions for Monolith Code, right?"

At this question, Leo answered without much confidence.

"To render the opposing team unable to continue, or transfer the code hidden within the monolith into the terminal, right?"

"That is correct. In order to transfer the code hidden within the monolith, a special Nonsystematic Magic must be inputted into the monolith. The special Magic Sequence serves as a key and splits the monolith in two. Once the monolith has been split, the team is forbidden from using magic to reseal the break. However, using magic to prevent the monolith from splitting is valid. Also, there is a requirement stating that the special Magic Sequence must be used within 10 meters of the monolith and would immediately stop upon leaving that range."

"......In other words, the defense's job is to prevent the enemy from getting within 10 meters of the monolith, and even if the special (key) Magic Sequence has been inputted, their goal then becomes preventing the monolith from opening or disrupting the enemy from reading the code, these three points?"

"Full marks."

Tatsuya nodded in satisfaction at Leo's answer.

"Generally, Counter Magic can be used to prevent the 'key' from activating, but even without that ability, Fortifying Magic is sufficient to prevent the monolith from opening. Strictly speaking, even if the monolith has been split, but if the two halves are still stuck together, this status can be maintained indefinitely. This way, because the monolith wasn't reattached after separation, this is not a violation of the rules."

Leo revealed a powerless expression swiftly followed by a suspicious glance towards Tatsuya.

"I really don't want to say this, Tatsuya, but isn't this the standard definition of 'trickery'......?"

Still, Tatsuya wasn't going to surrender to this level of sarcasm (even if it was only joking among friends).

"Leo and Erika say the exact same thing."

The first one to waver and shout out was Leo.

"Who do you take me for!"

"What are you talking about!"

Erika immediately set off a chain reaction.

"OK, OK, Erika-chan, relax a little. Leo-kun, please don't get too excited."

Thanks to Mizuki's intercession, the two of them avoided a head on conflict.

"......So I understand the 'key' portion. But how do we go about denying the enemy?"

Leo recovered his composure and asked a new question.

"Is kicking and punching off limits as well? I'm not exaggerating here, but long range magic is not my strong point."

"Then use this."

As he said this, Tatsuya pulled out that "sword".

"......Wait, I thought direct contact was forbidden?"

When Leo said this, Tatsuya handed him a thin little booklet.

"A manual?"

Why are you handing me this? Just as he was about to ask, Leo noticed a dog leaf on one of the pages and abandoned his question to flip open that page.

"Rules for Monolith Code, eh......?"

The printed rules for Monolith Code were all over the page, ranging from a simple explanation to newcomers without any preconceived notions to a more detailed play-by-play of an actual competition.

"It's enumerated here that attacks caused by objects under the effect of magic are not against the rules."

"So...... If an object is in flight due to magic...... Isn't that...... I got it."

The basic setup of this "sword" involved separating the blade in the middle, with half of the blade maintaining a set distance from the other half and flying through the air at will. From a magic systems perspective, it may be more appropriate to describe this as the blade extending through the air. From outward appearances, this was half of a broken sword flying to and fro through the sky. Since there was no physical connection between the two halves, this fulfilled the condition for "objects in flight due to magic".

"Tatsuya, did you create this thing because you knew about this ahead of time?"

At Leo's sincere query, Tatsuya could only chuckle wryly and shake his head.

"You overestimate me too much...... This was made purely on a whim. I'm not in the habit of creating malicious tricks day and night."

It seemed that neither Leo nor Erika was wholly satisfied with Tatsuya's explanation, but time was of the essence, so he chose to ignore it.

"This Weaponized Integrated CAD — 'Mini Communicator' has already been calibrated for Leo's personal use. I've already adjusted the variability of the distance and duration like we spoke of earlier, so don't mess up the controls."

"Eh? You mean we're doing a live test in combat!?"

"Everything tomorrow would be the same thing as live combat."

Tatsuya switched his tone and paused before adopting an enigmatic smile.

"Besides, I guarantee that this time it'll be far easier to use than last time."

"Fine, hopefully this won't be a problem."

Facing Tatsuya's evil smirk, Leo fearlessly took the "Mini Communicator" from him.

"Next is Mikihiko's role......"

"Yep, Tatsuya, what should I do?"

Mikihiko rose from the bed. Although he was initially indecisive, he was now very proactive, or maybe he was simply motivated now. Being roused to action was infinitely preferable to how he was before, but Tatsuya didn't touch on this and focused on his mission briefing.

"Guerrilla tactics will entail providing support to either the offense or the defense."

After delivering this simplistic answer, Tatsuya continued to ask.

"You are capable of other long range magic like the earlier lightning-based magic, correct?"

"Well, yeah......"

Mikihiko vaguely replied.

Families that had inherited Ancient Magic had a strong tendency to hide their own magic abilities.

In modern magic, thanks to the categorization and systems approach to magic, with a notable exception for a few BS Magicians, confidentiality has become a mere formality. However, due to the ingrained values system, this could still be seen at the subconscious level.

Nonetheless, they were headed into battle tomorrow, so if they couldn't be honest with one another now, they would be in dire straits.

"The destructive power for lightning magic is C-Rank, right?"

"......That's a magic that was only meant to disable the target, so it only rates as C-Rank. Since it hasn't been publicized yet, there is no actual record in the rankings."

"Unpublished, huh...... Wouldn't that be a huge problem if we used that tomorrow?"

"No...... There should be no problem. The theory behind it is not secret, but the Activation process is. If I avoid talismans and only use a CAD, we should be OK. ......Tatsuya."

"What's up?"

"Tatsuya...... You said this before, right? My...... The Yoshida Family's technique is too verbose, so I cannot wield magic in the way I desire."

"That is correct."

Erika stared at them with widened eyes. Next to her, Tatsuya decisively — more like ruthlessly — nodded.

Mizuki covered her mouth with both hands.

Even Leo was struck speechless.

The technique that the famous line of Ancient Magic users had laboriously developed over many generations had just been judged to be a "blemished product"! Without a certain degree of confidence, no one dared to make that assessment.

Otherwise, they were fools of the highest order that believed solely in the superiority of their own techniques.

Obviously, Tatsuya did not belong in the latter category.

"......Then Tatsuya, can you tell me a more efficient technique?"

"I won't tell you, I will configure one."

"......I'm sorry, the difference escapes me."

"The magic you used was likely a variant of 'Thunder Child'. What I can do is remove the unnecessary portions within the technique and reduce the number of computations while maintaining the phenomenon rewriting ability and alter the Activation Sequence to make that Magic Sequence possible, that's all. At the end of the day, this is still the magic that Mikihiko is comfortable with."

"......So you weren't joking when you said you can comprehend anything you see. It is a variant of 'Thunder Child'. In order to hide the weakness of the technique, additional layers were added on to disguise the original ability. However, this may tie into the unnecessary portions that Tatsuya spoke of."

"There was a time when longer casting times required certain defenses to avoid interference. Nevertheless, with the advent of CADs and the rise in casting speed for modern magic, individual counter spells have become obsolete since the magic that is being activated remains unknown. Thus, the real counter to modern magic doesn't lie in the type of magic, but counter magic that can eradicate its effectiveness in the first place."

Mikihiko made a small noise.

Amazingly, his smile was in no way self derogatory.

"Haha, so that's how it is...... Ancient Magic was supposed to possess superior firepower, but now they cannot stand against modern magic."

"That's incorrect, Mikihiko."

"Eh?"

"Ancient Magic and modern magic are not separated by superiority or inferiority, but by their individual strengths and weaknesses.

In a head-to-head match-up, modern magic commands a devastating advantage in casting speed, but from the perspective of surprise attacks, Ancient Magic boasts superior firepower and secrecy.

Didn't Elder Kudou also say this? The key is how you use magic. The reason I recommended you was because I thought that your magic would serve as an incredible ambushing tool."

"Ambushing tool, eh...... That's the first time I've heard of that."

Mikihiko closed his eyes and ruefully murmured. Afterwards, as if dispelling all his doubts, he opened his eyes again.

"I understand. I will use this technique without the talismans, so I'll rely on the CAD instead. Tatsuya, we'll go with your suggestion. I believe in you."

"Thanks, Mikihiko. Since you said that, there's one other thing I wanted to ask of you."

"Sure. This can't be helped, right? Not that I planned to keep it a secret anyway. My father was the one who brought me here, so even if our secret got out, it's not like they have the right to complain."

"Don't worry on that account, my lips are sealed."

"Ah~ ......Me too. I promise that I'll never let this spread."

"Likewise."

"I'm good for that too, as you know."

Besides Tatsuya, everyone present who had been silent until now affirmed their intent to keep his secret.

After viewing the last person (Erika) with considerable suspicion, logic finally trumped emotion as Mikihiko nodded towards Tatsuya.

"I'll keep this short. Can you use 'Visual Tuning'?"

Mikihiko replied after a short pause not because he was unwilling, but because he was totally shocked.

"......You know about that too? Did Kokonoe-sensei tell you that as well?"

"Maybe."

"......You certainly gave me a scare there, Tatsuya. Well, the answer is a definite yes. While I'm incapable of performing 'Five Sense Tuning', if it's only two at a time, I can still use 'Sense Tuning'."

"Visual is good enough, Mikihiko. In that case, our plan of attack is......"

Tatsuya didn't noticeably change his volume, but Mikihiko seemed to naturally crouch closer.

As promised, the calibration of Leo's CAD took less than an hour to finish.

After receiving his personal CAD and weaponized calculation device from Tatsuya, Leo opted to do some training to get used to the new model. Erika volunteered to be his sparring partner as they headed for the outdoor training facility.

The hour was late, but Erika said that with Leo around, nothing would happen to her or otherwise. So Tatsuya compromised.

Presently, Tatsuya was calibrating Mikihiko's CAD at lightning speed. Next to him, Azusa was staring at him in shock. As the user, Mikihiko was also present as he stared wide eyed at Tatsuya's unique calibration method and typing speed. Yet, the subject that astounded Azusa was not so superficial.

Right now, Tatsuya was assembling an Activation Sequence that took into account the traditional requirements for Ancient Magic and adapting them for use in modern magic. "Translating" the technique itself wasn't a particularly daunting task. Much like using a clumsy machine translation, awkward details and minor errors would be scattered all over the place.

Even Azusa was able to fix errors like those.

Yet the calibration being displayed before her eyes was nothing short of a complete rewriting of the Activation Sequence.

By fully comprehending the transformation process from Activation Sequence to Magic Sequence, he was rewriting the Activation Sequence without sacrificing any efficiency from the Magic Sequence.

The Activation Sequence is the blue print for the Magic Sequence. Rewriting the Activation Sequence implied that the Magic Sequence was also being rewritten. Not only did the magic have to be finely tuned to the individual Magician, the excess details in the Magic Sequence also had to be pruned to increase efficiency. That level of rewriting had long surpassed "revision" or "configuration" and had ascended to the realm of "innovation", which was the same thing as improving the very magic itself.

Before he began, Azusa honestly wondered whether this was even possible when she learned from Tatsuya what he was attempting to accomplish. Yet before Azusa's own eyes, he bypassed any experimental verification or live testing and proceeded directly to extracting the very essence of magic from the Activation Sequence and began cutting away at the unnecessary portions and redesigning the Activation Sequence. This was precisely what was unfolding on the editing machine.

Even Azusa, who had volunteered as Tatsuya's aide in place of the usual technician responsible for the Newcomers Division's Monolith Code event, felt powerless before this insane industry. Right now, the only thing she could do was examine the coding language for the freshly minted Activation Sequence as her gnawing doubts steadily solidified into conviction.

He — Shiba Tatsuya — had exceeded the standards of a high school Magic Artificer.

Scratch that, he had long since surpassed the boundaries of what it meant to be a Magic Artificer.

He must be—

Leaving Azusa milling in confusion behind him, Tatsuya used one full hour to completely rewrite Mikihiko's personal Activation Sequence.

Chapter 10

The fifth day of the Newcomers Division dawned with a bewildering atmosphere.

An unprecedented malicious act had occurred during Monolith Code yesterday, seriously injuring the players from First High to the point that they were unable to compete. Usually, the remaining two matches would end in their capitulation, but thanks to the board's intercession, a replacement team was allowed to compete on the following day.

Monolith Code used a variable rotation format with each school competing in four matches and the four schools with the most victories advancing to the elimination round.

In the event of a tie, totals were recalculated with uncontested victories excluded. In the event of a tie, there has been a precedent where two schools fought it out to determine who advanced. If there was no direct contest, then the school with the smaller amount of time needed for victory would advance.

The current standings were Third High with four victories, Eighth High with three, First, Second, and Ninth High each with two victories. Ninth High took less time to achieve two victories than Second High. One of First High's victories included Fourth High being disqualified, so they couldn't simply advance with two victories.

In today's special matches, if First High defeated Second and Eighth High, then the schools that advance would be First, Third, Eighth, and Ninth High.

If they beat Second High but lost to Eighth High, then First, Third, Eighth, and Ninth High would advance.

If they lost to Second High but were able to beat Eighth High, then First, Second, Third, and Eighth High would advance.

If they lost to both, then First High would not advance to the elimination round. Second, Third, Eighth, and Ninth High would advance instead.

...That was how this event was going to play out.

Regardless, if First High defeated Second High, then Second High would be eliminated rather than advancing without a win, hence Second High vigorously protested this arrangement. On the other hand, if they beat Eighth High and went easy on Second High, then the Nine Schools Competition would be accused of cutting inside deals.

"In other words, to please both sides, we just have to lose both matches..."

"If we're heading out, we're going out to win it. If we lose, then making the exception becomes pointless."

"Looks like I don't need to worry on that account."

The fact that First High's replacements were not registered players was the source of much confusion and gossip.

Rather than selecting their substitutes from the top ten representatives of their cohort, they went with a member of the technician team as well as two newly recruited members.

Some wondered, did First High hold back another expert on Monolith Code? In that case, why wasn't this person put forth as a starter for Monolith Code in the first place? Each of the schools was mystified by First High's intentions.

And now, the three of them who walked onto the arena only aroused more curiosity.

"...Don't you think we're a little too conspicuous?"

Mikihiko seemed unable to settle down. Hearing this, Tatsuya resolutely curtailed his words.

"It is only natural for players on the field to draw the eyes of the spectators."

"Well, that's not what I'm talking about..."

Mikihiko shook his head at Tatsuya pretending to be ignorant, despite knowing full well what he was talking about and cautiously peered at Leo.

"That's really eye-catching..."

Leo knew what that look implied and dropped his own gaze to waist level.

The ruckus from the stands vindicated Leo's suspicion. (That being said, it's not like they could tell what was being said.)

Their protective gear and helmets were the same as the other schools.

"A sword? Isn't direct contact against the rules?"

But the presence of the Mini Communicator threw the crowd into an uproar.

Leo's "sword" was actually a Weaponized-Integrated CAD. However, less than 10% of the crowd was actually able to discern that detail. Very few people, even among the players and engineers, knew of the existence of Weaponized-Integrated CADs, which was hardly surprising in and of itself.

In addition, magic written into the Weaponized-Integrated CAD usually involved buffing its martial ability — the "weapon's" ability. "Blades" usually improved cutting power. "Spears" buffed their piercing force. "Rods" strengthened their striking power. "Shields" empowered their defensive abilities.

Take "Sonic Blade" for an example, some of the options include "Speed Boost", "Penetration Boost", "Fortify", "Reflect", but all of these were used to raise (the original weapon's) martial nature and incorporated into the Weaponized-Integrated CAD.

As a "sword", the typical options include cutting power and armor penetration, so whichever power it was it still directly correlated with the weapon's physical attack. Anyone familiar with CADs was justified in their reasoning that this was against the rules for Monolith Code.

Yet, Leo was not the sole focus of attention.

"...There he is."

"Yeah. Never thought he would appear as a player on the field."

"Twin pistols, with a bracelet-model on the right wrist... Simultaneously operating three CADs?"

"He's not your average Joe. I don't think he's bluffing here. Doesn't it look like both are long-barrel model Specialized CADs?"

"They don't look like stealth weapons, so he's probably dual-wielding two Specialized CADs. But most people choose to use Generalized CADs when operating magic from different systems..."

"So you can operate multiple CADs at the same time. Show me what you're capable of!"

Masaki and Kichijouji's conversation embodied the perception from the majority of the viewers. Each school's players and auxiliaries were all watching Tatsuya.

This was the infernal super technician that won First Place for every event he was responsible for.

In contrast to the fervent cheers of support from the Year 1 female players, the Year 1 male players looked on mockingly.

They were silently rooting for the opposing team.

Curiosity reigned over all other thoughts now.

In the midst of this, the match against Eighth High commenced.

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"So we're up against Eighth High in a wooded area, eh..."

"Generally... That's to our disadvantage."

Mari murmured with eyes glued to the screen while Mayumi replied as she watched the progression.

Monolith Code was an event that placed the players against each other under variable outdoor conditions. The Nine Schools Competition used five scenarios: Woodlands, Boulders, Open Plains, Valley, and Urban Setting.

Among the magic high schools, Eighth High placed the most emphasis on outdoor training, so the Woodlands were like their home court. The settings were randomly generated. However, even under these exceptional conditions, the fact that an unfavorable setting was picked for one of the schools that originally possessed an unearned victory definitely raised concerns that someone was manipulating the odds.

—Yet, neither Mayumi nor Mari or any of the other members of the brass gathered in the pavilion were particularly worried.

It was public knowledge within First High's command level that Tatsuya trained under the "Ninjutsu Specialist" Kokonoe Yakumo. A woodland setting with lots of visual obstructions was an ideal location to bring out the merits of "ninjutsu" to the fullest. This was also common knowledge.

However, for the opposing school that was wholly unaware of this "fact", this was a titanic miscalculation.

Between the starting locations — where the monoliths were erected — there was a distance of approximately 800 meters.

In full protective gear and carrying a CAD, players needed at least five minutes to thread through the gaps within the woodlands.

When taking into account that they needed to be constantly on guard against enemy movements and assault, the time was easily several times greater.

Regardless — less than five minutes into the match, combat broke out near Eighth High's monolith.

The players' activities were closely monitored by anti-cheating cameras. The recorded images would be displayed on a large screen for the audience. In arenas with large numbers of visual obstructions, the audience was reliant on these images to follow the unfolding match.

Currently, the large screen hanging from the sky displayed Tatsuya's image appearing before the defender from Eighth High.

"He's fast...!"

"Personal Acceleration?"

At Kichijouji's murmur, Masaki also asked aloud, his eyes still locked onto the screen.

The image appeared briefly before the cameras, and then leaped out of the frame in the next instant.

The defender on the other side fell to one knee.

The camera switched over to find Tatsuya flanking the defender to the right side and sprinting for the monolith.

"No, it doesn't look like he used Move-Type Magic... Ah!"

The defender raised the muzzle of his CAD towards Tatsuya. Tatsuya's earlier attack appeared to only have temporarily upset the defender's balance.

The Specialized CAD shaped like a short-barrel pistol started its Activation Sequence.

Immediately, in the frame specifically designed to show psion motion, a rapidly expanding, non-physical shock wave — a psion explosion — shredded the defender's Activation Sequence into nothing.

Just then, Tatsuya's left hand was holding a CAD.

From the rear, his right hand was empty.

But in the image now, Tatsuya was running with the CAD in his right hand pointing towards the defender.

"When?"

Did he draw? Masaki omitted the last few words.

But Kichijouji's answer wasn't directly on the money.

"Wait, don't tell me... Gram Demolition!"

"Did you say Gram Demolition?"

The defender was shocked into immobility by his disintegrated Activation Sequence. Tatsuya kept an eye on his opponent and clicked the trigger in his right hand before the monolith.

"Nice! The monolith is opening!"

Seeing Tatsuya plug in the special code that served as a key and split the enemy monolith in two, Honoka was fairly dancing with joy.

"...Odd."

By her side, Shizuku wrinkled her brows in confusion.

"Shizuku, what's odd?"

In the crowd of Year 1 female students, Eimi asked Shizuku.

"The monolith has been opened, so why is he retreating?"

Just as Shizuku said, Tatsuya didn't approach to copy the code in the monolith but altered his path and ducked back into the cover of darkness within the forest.

"Now that you mention it... Hey, Miyuki, what do you think?"

"Even Onii-sama would be hard pressed to input all 512 characters under constant enemy harassment."

The shell-shaped keyboard worn on the left wrist was also the terminal used to input the code. Even if Tatsuya typed at lightning speed, he would still need some time to input all 512 characters on the tiny keyboard.

"You're right... This is the first time I've seen someone use the key while the defenders are paralyzed."

Just as Shizuku muttered with dawning comprehension, the frozen defender came around and hustled into the trees after Tatsuya.

"Just now... That was..."

When Tatsuya used Counter Magic, no one was more astounded than Mari herself.

Mari was panting and unable to speak coherently. The surprising thing was that next to her, Mayumi was able to reply blandly.

"Gram Demolition... I had an inkling you were capable, Tatsuya-kun... And you didn't disappoint."

"Mayumi, you know what that was?"

Mayumi glanced at Mari, who was itching to approach, and swiftly looked back towards the viewing screen.

"Gram Demolition uses compressed psion particles to directly detonate the target by charging forward without using the Information Dimension. This Counter Magic is accomplished by forcibly blowing away all the accompanying Activation and Magic Sequences — anything that has traces of magic psions recorded on it.

This is a magic that demolishes the record of magic (Gram), hence the name Gram Demolition.

While it is called magic, this is strictly a psion cannon ball that makes no attempt to use Magic Sequences to alter reality. This way, Gram Demolition is not restricted by Data Fortification or wide area interference, and the cannon ball's own pressure would reject any effects of Cast Jamming.

Since there's no actual physical effect, physical obstructions can do nothing.

This way, the magic that your opponent is casting is forcibly blown away by the psions.

In order to halt that kind of furious charge, a multi-layered defensive wall of psions might barely hold up.

Besides its rather short effective range, there are almost no weaknesses. Along with Gram Dispersion, Gram Demolition is known as one of the strongest Counter Magics within Nonsystematic Magic... But there are very few people capable of performing this feat.

I cannot do it either.

Since this isn't an interference ability but a true dispersion, I am unable to create that kind of force with my psion count.

In summation, it's a super heavyweight!"

"...In other words, it's like a huge brute swinging around a giant mace with all his strength, right?"

Hearing Mari's roundabout description, Mayumi burst into laughter.

"To be able to say it like that, you're quite calm about it, Mari! However, you're largely correct. During the match with Hanzou-kun, I thought Tatsuya-kun was a more delicate, finesse type... I never imagined that he was actually a front line bruiser."

"Then, during the incident on the way here, it was really..."

"I believe that's what happened. I didn't see it at the time, but didn't Mari witness it? There were at least ten overlapping Magic Sequences during the incident, but they were all dispelled instantly... Exactly how high is his psion count..."

Eighth High's formation consisted of one defender and two attackers.

The two attackers split into two paths. One of them reached First High's territory.

"Ah, Tatsuya-kun, hurry!"

"Go, Leo-kun!"

First High's territory, which contained First High's monolith, was in a setting that allowed the audience to easily pick out all the details.

Under Erika and Mizuki's gaze, Leo dropped into a combat stance before his monolith and drew the "sword" from his waist.

The attacker's figure could be seen in the shade of the trees.

He held a Specialized CAD similar to the ones his teammates were carrying.

The attacker's intent was clearly to overwhelm Leo, the defender, then open the monolith in one go.

The attacker aimed his CAD at Leo.

While Leo swung the Weaponized Integrated CAD "Mini Communicator" horizontally.

Both occurred at the same time.

"Excellent!"

"Damn, that guy's pretty good!"

Both Erika and Mizuki erupted into cheers.

A flying metal board traced an arc as it flew through the trees and sent the attacker rolling with a direct blow from the front.

Based on the coordinates of the trees, Leo had already calculated his effective range and used the separated blade to strike away at the attacking player.

After restoring the "blade" as one, Leo pointed the "sword" towards the sky.

The "blade" in his hand shot forward and came to a halt high in the sky.

"Oh — Ah —!"

With a roar, Leo swung the "blade" downwards with a speed that matched the radial motion and bestowed the final blow to the attacker lying on the ground.

"What, was that?"

While her question may seem stern, Suzune's question clearly portrayed that she lost a little of her usual coolness.

"That would be the "Mini Communicator" — a Weaponized Integrated CAD and original magic that Shiba-kun pioneered."

Azusa, who was on hand last night during calibration, answered in response.

"Both a Weaponized Integrated CAD and an original... I wonder what's the design?"

Hearing Azusa's concise explanation, Suzune nodded repeatedly.

"I see, that is a novel concept. Yet, for Shiba-kun at least, this seems like a coarse system."

"Coarse, is it?"

Suzune patiently explained to Azusa, who was tilting her head to one side.

"Yes, this magic has obvious limitations regarding the user's physical specifications and usable environmental situations..."

The third player from Eighth High was repeatedly backtracking through the forest.

While the setting was the woodlands, this wasn't the Fuji forests themselves. Parts of the hills in the arena were artificial, with trees and plants transplanted here, and it was only intended for training purposes.

Half a century had passed since the transplanting phase, and the forest had naturally grown on its own. Still, this wasn't a dense jungle where people could easily get lost 800 meters in.

But the reality was that the player from Eighth High was hopelessly lost.

"Where the hell are you, you SOB! Stop skulking around and get your butt out here!"

The player from Eighth High made no attempt to disguise the agitation in his voice as he attempted to use magic to remove the ultrasound waves.

The strength of the ultrasound waves was not even worth mentioning.

The only noticeable effect was a slight ringing in the ears.

That being said, this ringing was irritating to the extreme.

While the players were wearing military-grade protective helmets, they were only standard infantry gear intended to protect the head from shock and pressure, so there was no function to block vapors or sound waves. The helmet protected the face, but there were small holes to allow sounds to reach the ears.

Under attack from ultrasound waves, the only counter was to use your own magic to defend yourself.

The player from Eighth High returned his team CAD to the holster and pulled out a cellphone-shaped Generalized CAD he prepared from his pocket. He planned to use this to defend himself from the ultrasound waves and advance on First High's position,

However, regardless of how long he walked, he never found the enemy field.

He never even noticed.

Under a constant barrage of high and low frequency sounds, his attention had been entirely drawn to the high frequencies, enabling the low frequencies to wreak havoc in his inner ear.

His vision was restricted as he endlessly turned left and right — complicated by the fact that he had no opportunity to reestablish his bearings and his senses were out of whack. This would naturally result in the situation where he was utterly unable to grasp his current location.

If someone noticed they were lost, they would immediately consult a compass, but if they were gradually misled by their senses, it was infinitely more difficult to correct the problem without being aware that one was misled in the first place.

The player from Eighth High had fallen into the time-honored trap known as "hubris".

Mikihiko was the one responsible for laying this snare.

Spirit Magic "Echo Maze".

Even if he wanted to retaliate, thanks to his scrambled senses, he couldn't even tell where the caster was. Scratch that, even if he was functioning normally, he had no chance of sniffing out Mikihiko's location.

That was because Mikihiko initiated this sound wave attack through the spirits.

If he caught the source of the magic, the only thing he would find would be the position of the floating spirits.

The power of absolute stealth.

This was one of the greatest weapons within "Divine Earth Magic", the branch of Spirit Magic Mikihiko belonged to.

Behind the aimlessly wandering player from Eighth High, Mikihiko calculated that it was about time to execute the next phase of the mission.

After luring the defender away from the monolith and deep into the forest, Tatsuya was mulling his options and trying to decide whether he should attack directly or assist in other theaters.

If he chose to attack, he must win the necessary time to input the code after swiftly incapacitating his opponent.

If he chose to assist, he must continue to draw the defender's attention, hereby buying time for Mikihiko to input the code.

He paused for an instant to consider.

Tatsuya elected to attack.

He drew the CAD on his left and clicked the trigger after pointing it towards the ground.

After activating magic to lighten his weight, he lightly tapped off the ground and sprang along the treetops with the ease of a squirrel.

Once he used magic, his opponent should be able to easily pinpoint his location.

The use of magic would create unavoidable side effects through the change in Eidos.

A skilled Magician could not only identify the caster's location based on the ripples of magic, but even the magic used as well. However, for such a weakly applied magic like this, could the player from Eighth High even detect that he used Weight-Type Magic? And if so, could he ascertain that Tatsuya was bounding along the treetops?

For Tatsuya, that would be the most convenient outcome.

As he moved between trees, he didn't cast magic while leaping.

As if his legs had springs attached to them, he didn't even cause the trees to shake.

As expected, the defender had already arrived at the point where he had leaped off the ground.

His gaze was scrolling upwards.

Behind him, Tatsuya squeezed the trigger in his right hand.

On the widescreen that showed psion movements, the image depicted the defender from Eighth High as he was inundated with psions from Nonsystematic magic.

The defender staggered briefly, then collapsed.

"...'Resonate', eh, Nonsystematic Magic."

"So he used biological waves and the psion wave to create resonance in order to incapacitate his opponent?"

Hearing Kichijouji's words, Masaki nodded.

"It appears that he's calibrated the right hand to use Nonsystematic Magic and the left hand to use Weight-Type Magic and is using them interchangeably."

"George... Don't you think this guy's Nonsystematic Magic contains traces of Ancient Magic?"

"You think so too, Masaki? Is it Shugendo... Or even Ninjutsu? Biological waves — historically known as 'chi', is actually quite similar to the magic he's using."

"I think that even those Ancient Magic users wouldn't con people with the term 'chi' these days."

"Ho? Nitpicking isn't very becoming of you, Masaki."

The defender hadn't completely lost his mobility. He was still somewhat conscious. Still, in his current condition, he was no longer able to keep up with Tatsuya.

Using a bent tree branch's potential energy, Tatsuya took a giant leap. As he flew overhead, he clicked the trigger in his left hand and didn't bother to adopt a landing posture. He arrived in front of the monolith in a blink of an eye.

The image of Tatsuya opening the shell and inputting the code was displayed all over the screen.

Off in the distance, the wails of the supporters from Eighth High could be heard, but Mayumi turned to look at Mari.

Mari also turned to catch Mayumi's gaze.

"...He won."

"...He actually won."

Now, First High was guaranteed to advance to the elimination round.

Yet for some reason, neither one of them seemed overjoyed at that thought.

After receiving the code, the ending whistle rang out shrilly.

As First High's banner was raised into the air, the stands where First High's supporters sat turned into a complete bedlam.

"We won! We won!!"

"Amazing, amazing, amazing! It was a complete victory!"

"Congratulations, Miyuki!"

"Your brother did it!"

The shrill shrieks of joy came from the Year 1 female players.

It was as if they had captured the championship already.

There were also cheers and congratulations being swapped in the normal stands, but much more subdued.

"Whew... My heart almost stopped!"

"Why? Weren't Tatsuya-kun, Leo-kun, and Yoshida-kun all safe and sound?"

"Nah, I felt that besides Tatsuya-kun, the others were really tight..."

"Eh? How?"

"You ask how... Well, in a lot of ways."

Hearing her friend's abstract and incomprehensible words, Mizuki tilted her head in a comical fashion.

"You're weird, Erika-chan."

At being seen as a weirdo by Mizuki, Erika had dozens of excuses lined up to defend herself, but making her friends anxious wasn't Erika's favorite pastime, so she decided to let it slide just this once.

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The next match, between First High and Second High, was set 30 minutes from now.

While he felt that the break was rather short, Masaki didn't have to worry about this since he was unlikely — (certainly) — not going to meet them in battle today. On the other hand, he should probably welcome the idea of First High's players exhausting themselves. Yet, the moment he thought of this, he found the idea despicable and immediately erased it from his thoughts.

The next setting hadn't been announced yet.

After the match, Masaki was still sitting on the observation deck and couldn't help but engage Kichijouji in conversation.

"So, what do you think of that match?"

"Masaki isn't asking about the team as a whole, but 'him', right?"

His words corrected for him, Masaki could only smile wryly.

"You're right. George, if it was you, how would you handle him?"

"I feel that he's very accustomed to the battlefield. Combat movement, surveying the battlefield, positioning... Compared to his magical abilities, those are the things we should be watching out for, aren't they?"

"What about his magic?"

"Let me think... While I was shocked by 'Gram Demolition'... But that final 'Resonance', even though he got the perfect surprise attack from behind, he wasn't able to render his opponent completely unconscious. Isn't that an opening we can exploit?"

"Yeah..."

"Now that I think about it, at first contact he likely used Weight-Type Magic to disturb his opponent's balance — but he may have wanted to topple his opponent completely, but was only able to force him to one knee.

That was also the case with the Light Weight Magic he used to jump to the trees. Just that alone was not sufficient to hold his weight.

To a certain degree, perhaps he's unable to wield strong magics?

This may be a side effect from using high performance CADs for so long, he may be unable to use his full strength with inferior models, but we may never know."

"That's possible. With that kind of superlative skill, he would naturally use the state-of-the-art hardware. Thanks to his sudden elevation as a substitute, he didn't have the time to get used to the weaker models."

"We don't know all the details, but that's not necessary, is it? At any rate, from a magic perspective, I think 'Gram Demolition' is the only thing we need to watch out for. Rather than following the example from the player of Eighth High, we should definitely take heed not to fall into the same strategy."

"So you mean that we do not fear him in a head-to-head confrontation?"

"Exactly. If we could only force him to meet you man-to-man... If we could do that, then Masaki's triumph is assured. For example, if our match is set on the 'Open Plains', we would win ten out of ten."

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During the resting period for the players of First High, Mikihiko was distracted as he repeatedly sat and rose from his seat.

"Mikihiko... Can you settle down?"

The calibration for the "Mini Communicator" was just completed. As if reexamining its weight, Leo was waving it around as he said listlessly.

"Leo... You're truly a carefree sort. Well... Even meeting peers from other classes that we've never met before."

Those words seemed to be squeezed out of Mikihiko. Under a "What?" gaze from everyone, Miyuki revealed a charming smile.

"I never knew that Yoshida-kun was so shy!"

Tatsuya shrugged and sat in a relaxed posture. Behind him, Miyuki stood there massaging his shoulders and turned a dazzling smile on Mikihiko.

"I think that Mikihiko's reaction is perfectly normal. He is an innocent youth after all, Miyuki."

"Aya! Really, Onii-sama. Miyuki has never seen a shy Onii-sama before, has she?"

Seeing Tatsuya turn his head and gaze at her with narrowed eyes, Miyuki's smile only widened. During this time, her soft, white fingers never stopped to gently caress and massage her brother's shoulders.

— So I'm shy, damn it! —

— But seeing you guys like this only makes me even more mortified! —

...Unable to voice this aloud, Mikihiko could only suffer through this in silence.

Speaking of which, Mayumi and Azusa passed through the covering (made of the highest quality cloth from the 21st century) and came in.

Seeing the siblings like so, both came to a halt, with Azusa's face turning hotter with each passing second.

While Mayumi failed to blush openly, she looked at Tatsuya as if she saw a dirty stray crawling in the filth.

"...Somehow, I feel like I'm being mercilessly condemned, or is that disdain?"

"You're thinking too much!"

When Tatsuya turned to face her directly, Mayumi ruthlessly bit those words out, then quickly coughed to pretend to clear her throat.

By the time she turned around, Tatsuya already rose.

(Somehow...This child seems like a soldier...)

The tips of his toes were slightly apart, his back ramrod straight, both hands were crossed behind his back, as if this pose was perfectly natural for him. Was this anxiety, prudence, or overconfidence? Nothing seemed out of place on him.

Rather, it made her feel like her own actions were undeniably childish.

"...Seriously, don't worry about it."

In the end, Mayumi still defended herself despite her overwhelming reluctance to do so, causing her to slightly despise herself and wish for a swift end to this task.

"The setting of the next match has been decided."

"So you've come specifically to tell us. Much thanks."

Tatsuya lightly bowed to Mayumi and used his eyes to ask: "Where?"

"Urban district."

Mayumi's words struck Tatsuya speechless.

"...This is still the case despite what happened yesterday?"

"That's because the setting was selected randomly. I'm afraid they didn't even take it into consideration."

"I see..."

It was quite impressive that the board was willing to be so candid, Tatsuya thought, but he chose not to voice this.

"I'll hurry over immediately. The CAD calibration is already done."

"Thank you!"

Mayumi nodded her acceptance while Leo and Mikihiko immediately started preparing.

The preparations only included buckling on the protective jacket, helmet, and CAD they took off earlier.

That was all the preparation necessary.

They threw on the jacket, closed the zipper and tightened the buttons.

"Uh, Shiba-kun..."

As Tatsuya adjusted the CAD and holster, Azusa asked him a question.

"What is it?"

"What are you going to do with... Saijou-kun's CAD?"

"What am I going to do?"

"Because... Wouldn't it be hard to use the 'Mini Communicator' in close quarters, such as rooms or stairs? That magic can only cause the blade to float in the air, so its strength is still reliant on the user's arm strength, right? While the blade does possess the advantage of 'extension,' if there isn't sufficient room to swing the weapon, then there wouldn't be any advantage in its design... At least, that's what I heard."

"From Ichihara-senpai, correct?"

Tatsuya's words saw right through her, causing Azusa to blush, but for a wholly different reason than before.

"As expected of Ichihara-senpai, that was quite the accurate analysis. However, please don't worry on that point. There will still be room to swing a sword in the interior. Even if we can't use a ten meter long sword, one meter will work just as well."

Catching Tatsuya's signal, Leo nodded with a "Just leave it to me" expression.

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The match between First and Second High completely ignored the incident yesterday and set their respective monoliths inside two buildings — specifically, the third floor in five floor buildings.

This stubborn refusal to accept their own responsibility and error once more reminded everyone that the bureaucracy from the magic universities was quite politically minded.

—However, neither the responsibility nor the blame for yesterday's "accident" would fall in the laps of the management board.

For Tatsuya at least, enclosed locations with lots of cover from prying eyes were infinitely preferable to wide open areas, so he wasn't complaining.

Currently, Tatsuya had infiltrated the top floor of Second High's building. He snuck between the detection of the defenders and looped from the neighboring buildings into this one by hopping along the rooftops without using magic. Precisely because he was engaged in purely physical activities, he eluded the detection of the defenders as he closed in on the target.

Due to the fact that he was passing between the shadows of the buildings and maintaining a stealthy profile, Tatsuya spent a considerable duration of time. Even if they lost this match, they would still advance to the elimination round. That being said, the format of the elimination round pitted the first seed against the fourth seed, and the second seed against the third seed. Meeting Third High in the semifinals was completely different than taking them on during the finals. Tatsuya estimated that time was still in short supply even though he left Mikihiko behind to support Leo.

"Mikihiko, can you hear me?"

"Received, Tatsuya."

While Monolith Code didn't forbid the players from using wireless communicators, very few schools took advantage of this. That was because, even if the contents of the message couldn't be deciphered, modern techniques were quite capable of pinpointing the sender's location.

On top of that, a three man team using wireless communicators could easily run into the situation where one or more of the members were out of range. Generally speaking, wireless communicators bore little value in this competition.

Despite this, Tatsuya still prudently chose to use this service, undoubtedly for some ulterior motive.

"Let's begin. We're relying on you to find the monolith's location."

"We can't hold out here forever. Hurry up!"

"Understood."

The other side appeared to be locked in combat.

Tatsuya manipulated the bracelet on his right wrist and brought up summoning magic.

Leo swung the "Mini Communicator" horizontally with gusto.

The metallic piece was 40 cm long and 12 cm wide — part of the blade flew through the air in an arc and rushed towards the player from Second High. The weapon's lack of weight was made up for by additional arm strength in the swing. Leo chopped the attacker's legs from beneath him.

The attacker fell to the earth. If this was "live combat" he would immediately step forward and bestow a finishing blow. However, Monolith Code forbade close quarters combat.

"Mikihiko!"

Even knowing he couldn't hear him, Leo still signaled Mikihiko, who was "watching" the scene unfold through the spirits.

In response, a ball of lightning formed in the air.

And struck the prone player from Second High.

Yet, Leo didn't have the spare time to express joy over taking out one person.

Noticing that his body was under the effect of Move-Type Magic, Leo hurriedly shouted.

"Halt!"

The voice activated CAD on his left wrist received his command through the microphone embedded in his helmet. In terms of wielding two CADs simultaneously, so long as the two activated magics were from different systems, no interference would occur between the two.

Fortunately — in only a handful of situations — Leo's personal CAD was a highly durable and reliable CAD that had the processing power from two generations ago, so it fulfilled the conditions for competition-use CADs in the Nine Schools Competition. Even if the dubious nature and slight time delay for the voice recognition system were not up to Tatsuya's standards, in this situation, personal habits trumped that concern, hence Leo was using his personal CAD after some (massive) adjustments to the Activation Sequence.

Just as planned, even though Leo's CAD was the "latter one", it still managed to invoke defensive magics before the enemy's Move-Type Magic launched its attack.

From where he was standing — setting the point where his feet contacted the ground, he fortified his body's connection to the corresponding coordinates. This was the same tactic that Mari used during Battle Board, though on a smaller scale. Mari's magic allowed the body freedom of movement while stabilizing herself relative to the moving board. Unlike this, Leo's sole purpose was to solidly "stabilize" himself to the ground without moving a single muscle. This only lasted for a short instant.

However, because this was a massively downgraded application, this was still able to counter the magic his opponent was in the process of casting.

This building was designed after a school dorm.

From the broken windows, their opponent's figure could be seen passing through the corridors.

Leo pulled back his right hand and fell into a lunging position, but his opponent had already fled.

Cautiously approaching the prone and convulsing player, he removed his protective helmet.

According to the rules, once an opponent lost their protective helmet, they were forbidden from taking any further action during the match.

(OK, now we've taken out one of them...)

Even knowing he had no way of sending this message, Leo still thought this in the privacy of his mind.

(It's all up to you, Tatsuya. It's getting hairy over here.)

Thanks to Tatsuya's summoning magic, the spirit stuck to him became active.

Tatsuya was unable to use Spiritual Magic.

Even if he could detect the active SB, he had no way of commanding it. Magicians utilized modern magic to create false signals to manipulate and rewrite the Eidos of a target and not because they could exert their will to control the Eidos itself.

Nonetheless, they were still capable of using the most basic summoning magic from Spiritual Magic.

He was able to memorize the Magic Sequence within the Activation Sequence because his artificial magic calculation area was stored within his consciousness. No matter what magic it was, once he decoded the Activation Sequence that served as a blueprint for the Magic Sequence, this rudimentary projection of the Magic Sequence was still within his abilities.

This wasn't even on the same level as casting magic since he was merely imitating the processes that led to magic invocation. However, so long as the necessary components were involved, even if it was a simple replication, some degree of effect could be achieved.

Mikihiko placed an inactive spirit on Tatsuya, which Tatsuya used magic to reactivate.

This way, he immediately established a connection with the "master", Mikihiko.

While Tatsuya was unable to control the spirit, he had no reason to do so in the first place.

To some degree, his objective was to bring Mikihiko's reactivated spirit into enemy territory.

His earlier magic should have alerted the defender to his presence.

The most desirable outcome was for the defender to leave the monolith and climb to his level.

Tatsuya silently began to move.

Through his "contracted" spirit, Mikihiko detected that Tatsuya also successfully "summoned".

(Seriously, how are you a Course 2 student, Tatsuya......?)

This thought formed in one corner of his mind as Mikihiko concentrated on the far away spirit.

In reality, in magic terms, distance posed no real barrier. For the giant information dimension, physical distance wasn't even an issue.

Originally, only Nonsystematic Magic that directly fired psions without using the information dimension would be restricted by physical distance.

Yet, human beings are limited by the five senses as well as their experiences.

If the physical distance was very large, there would be a "distant" perception.

This perception of distance becomes a magic's "range".

With that knowledge in mind, magic also becomes less effective.

Thus, for casting magic on remote targets, the key lay in the perception that the target was right before the caster.

On this point, Spiritual Magic referred to the connection between caster and spirit — once synchronized, they could feel the proximity of the spirit. In other words, Spirit Magic was something that could easily circumvent the range issues for magic.

—Just like this.

(......I see him.)

Visual Tuning.

He wasn't summoning the spirit over and reading the recorded information. Instead, he was using the connection through the information dimension to directly receive the visual information through the active spirit. This was known as Spirit Magic's "Sense Tuning". When restricted to vision only in order to promote clarity, this technique was known as "Visual Tuning".

"Found him, Tatsuya!"

Yet, next came the tricky part.

Mikihiko was maintaining the connection to two spirits — the one following Tatsuya and the other on Leo, as he transmitted this to Tatsuya.

(That was fast...... So he found it already.)

Spirit Magic was quite convenient, he thought leisurely as he heightened the tension in his body.

No matter how you described it, he was concealing himself by hanging from the ceiling.

Probably because the building was intentionally set in a state of construction, there were many exposed air vents inter-crossed over the room where Second High's monolith was located. Tatsuya hung from one of them and watched the defender cautiously poke his head around beneath him.

He must have detected the source of the signal, but he never imagined that his opponent was lurking in ambush above him.

Maybe not, Tatsuya thought.

In his eyes, the defender's extreme agitation created this tunnel vision.

His breathing was ragged likely because he ran up the flights of stairs.

He certainly didn't feel like someone suited for defense. At this juncture, he was supposed to be cheered at his opponent's ineptitude, as pity would most definitely be hypocritical.

He toyed with the idea of letting the defender pass, but he ultimately chose to release his grip, twisting in the air to prepare for his landing and pulling out the CAD from his right at the same time.

He squeezed the trigger immediately upon hitting the ground.

The defender didn't even have a chance to turn his head.

The activated magic was simply a psion shock wave. For a few seconds, the technique would incapacitate him by creating concussion-like symptoms.

In combat, a few precious seconds was the difference between life and death, but this was a competition that forbade direct contact. Tatsuya kept an eye on his unbalanced opponent and ran towards the target Mikihiko pinpointed for him.

It took him less than 10 seconds to pass two rooms and reach his destination.

Noticing that the defender was finally on the move, Tatsuya pointed his CAD directly at his feet.

Each floor was three and a half meters high.

There were approximately seven meters between the third and fifth floors.

This was well within the firing range of the "key".

He squeezed the trigger.

A subtle change in Eidos traveled along his hands.

Prudently, Tatsuya took the stairs opposite from where he came and descended to the next floor.

With his sight synchronized with the spirit, Mikihiko easily saw the code carved within the monolith.

He looked away.

Right now, Leo hadn't made contact with the enemy yet.

Mikihiko prayed for a little luck as he started to input the code he visually received from the spirit.

When the ending whistle sounded, Tatsuya was busy dodging the "Kamaitachi" magic the defender was shooting at him.

Leo had his back to the monolith and was prepared to throw everything he had into one last charge.

"Whew...... That went down to the wire!"

Mayumi let out a satisfied breath of relief to which Mari responded with a displeased disposition.

"That guy...... Was he screwing around near the end?"

"Eh? Really?"

"He should easily be able to avoid those attacks...... Why didn't he eliminate his opponent?"

"I'm sure he has his reasons."

Mari glared at Tatsuya with a peeved expression on her face while Mayumi calmly rebuffed her words.

"What do you mean? He used 'Resonance' during the last match and something else to take out Hattori. Shouldn't he have more tricks up his sleeve?"

"Supposedly, he cannot use the magic he used against Hanzou-kun because the hardware requirements for the competition-use CAD are unable to execute his abilities. Likewise, wasn't his 'Resonance' attack from the last match unable to completely silence his opponent?

Mari, have you forgotten?

Yesterday, we forced Tatsuya-kun into the replacement's role, so he only had one night to prepare! In that one night, he had to calibrate Saijou-kun and Yoshida-kun's CADs and also had to iron out a strategy that took full advantage of their talents......

I can understand that Mari's irritation comes from the fact that you hold Tatsuya-kun in high esteem. However, I think it is irresponsible to have towering expectations without giving him the necessary time to meet those expectations."

"Well...... OK......"

Mari nodded slightly, signifying she was reflecting on her words. Suddenly, she paused.

"......Speaking of which, Mayumi."

"Yeah, what's up!"

Feeling an icy aura of vengeance manifesting, Mayumi couldn't help but shiver.

Still, this may be exactly what Mari was looking for.

"You were quite ready to come to Tatsuya-kun's defense!"

"Wha!? No, what are......"

"No need to be ashamed about it. However...... I think even you would be in for a hard fight against that sis-con level......"

"I already said that wasn't it!"

While Mari's objection was derailed by a tangent during a typical conversation (more like nitpicking) for female high school students, those sentiments were echoed by someone else with another perspective among the audience.

"In the end, he only used 'Gram Demolition', 'Resonance', 'Phantom Blow', and Weight-Type Magic, eh...... I can understand not using 'Decomposition', but isn't he skimping too much by not using Flash Cast or Elemental Sight?"

"Sensei, you should know that he has reasons for keeping those under wraps, right?"

"But, Fujibayashi...... Forget Flash Cast for now, even if he used 'Eyes of the Spirits', none of those third-rate Magicians watching him would have any idea what he just did."

Dr. Yamanaka and Lieutenant Fujibayashi from the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion were deep in conversation in the audience stands. If someone familiar with the concepts overheard their conversation, they would undoubtedly leap out of their chair in surprise. Yet, since they were wearing inconspicuous summer clothes, these two could easily have been mistaken for a couple — which was impossible, since they looked like a doctor and his nurse (In Japanese, "sensei" could be used to address a teacher or doctor). If anyone overheard a series of foreign terms, they would probably think they were specific terms from psychology or a related field. No one around them paid them any particular heed.

"Despite this, if someone saw what should not be seen, this would raise a warning flag among the sharper spectators. Compared to Sensory Magic, 'Elemental Sight' is more like a Superpower. Based on the situation, it may draw more attention than even 'Decomposition'."

The "Eyes of the Spirits" they were talking about — "Elemental Sight" referred to Tatsuya's ability to identify the "landscape (color)" of the information dimension.

Each of the Four Major Systems and Eight Major Types of magic projected Magic Sequences onto the Eidos through the information dimension.

Thus, Magicians who wield modern magic have the ability to link to the information dimension. By connecting to the information dimension and verifying its "existence" — Tatsuya's senses could be said to expand the field.

And...... this "expansion" had dire consequences.

Anything with a physical body in this world had their Eidos imprinted in the information dimension.

Also, this wasn't done through the five senses, or as if he could "see through" this expanded information dimension and the subsystem's signals to pull out the targets he needed. Rather, he was able to identify each and every Eidos and target them separately.

In other words, no one could escape from his Elemental Sight.

The term "Eyes of the Spirits" was actually a misnomer that became part of the technical jargon due to its long service.

The first scholars who translated this term initially used the adjective "Elemental", but that was mistaken to mean the noun "Elemental", giving rise to "Eyes of the Elementals", which was shortened to "Eyes of the Spirits". Of course, there were many people who caught onto the mistake, but since "Eyes of the Spirits" was more magically inclined than "Elemental Sight", the name stuck. This was a slightly unscientific way of approaching the issue, but that was the reason why the term was never corrected.

While this "mistake" was the source of much friction between specialists and non-specialists...... Regarding the fact that no one stepped forward to correct the issue, the jury was still out on whether this was mystifying or worthy of despairing over.

— Back to main line —

Yamanaka knew exactly what Fujibayashi was talking about. Elemental Sight was the same as "Mist Dispersal" in that they were both highly classified.

Despite this, Yamanaka was still reluctant to accept that.

"Since he's not allowed to disclose this, we're probably in the same boat......"

They were neither simple nor innocent enough to simply come and support Tatsuya. Nor was Tatsuya fragile enough to painfully publicize that which was forbidden before everyone present. On this point, Yamanaka, Fujibayashi, Kazama, Sanada, and Yanagi were all perfectly clear. Nonetheless, there were always exceptions. If a catastrophe broke out and classified magic was forced out into the open before public eyes, they had to be on hand to handle the situation. That was why they were here bending all their focus and energy towards Tatsuya's match.

Thus, they had no right to criticize the Yotsuba Family's clandestine nature, which was precisely Yamanaka's point. Regardless of how much Yamanaka wanted to see Tatsuya cut loose and show the world a move or two, there was nothing to be done.

"Still, I think that he may get around to Flash Cast. Against the 'Prince' or the 'Cardinal', I don't think even he could handle them with such a weak CAD."

As if finally soothing Yamanaka's demands, Fujibayashi ended the conversation there.

Not all the audience members were focused on Tatsuya alone.

A considerable amount of people were watching Leo. Especially because he was the first one to wield a Weaponized-Integrated CAD in this competition that both dazzled and bewildered the audience.

Likewise, several spectators were also watching Mikihiko, who had accurately "seen through" the 512 character code from range. Among the crowd of spectators who remained oblivious to what happened, one childhood friend was the exception.

"Really, Miki...... You're just like you were before."

"Eh, what is the same as before, Erika-chan?"

Mizuki tilted her head in interest at Erika's involuntary muttering. Erika vaguely replied back to muddle the issue, then fell deep into her own thoughts.

Erika and Mikihiko's relationship went back farther than Mizuki realized, so of course she knew exactly what Mikihiko was doing.

While Sense Tuning was by no means a small feat, before his unfortunate accident, the so-called "prodigy" Mikihiko could use that as easily as he breathed the very air itself. Nevertheless, after that incident occurred, he was never able to freely wield magic the way he used to.

(Seriously...... Your mental trauma had long since healed.)

Occasionally, people would say that physical injuries were easy to heal, but mental wounds closed slowly.

In reality, physical injuries were also separated between those that could be saved, and those that couldn't.

At the same time, mental trauma should be the same.

(Miki...... Did you notice? Today, you are just like you were at your peak!)

Erika didn't possess the power to identify spirits, nor was she equipped with the eyes to see the spirits themselves.

Thus, she was unable to directly confirm whether Spiritual Magic had succeeded. That being said, she was a daughter of the Chiba Family, renowned for endlessly training in anti-personnel magic combat.

Based on the minute and subtle changes in motion, line of sight, and expression, it was possible to identify to some degree when someone used magic, what they were targeting, and whether they succeeded.

The daughter of the Chiba Family used her pair of "Swordsman's Eyes" to behold that Mikihiko had cast his desired magic at long last.

(Unbelievable...... Hurry up and realize this. You've already recovered!)

Presently, Mikihiko had recovered his "ability" but not his "confidence."

She could read that much from his stolid expression. This was the product of many years of forced interaction during their childhood years.

Now, all he needed to do was renew his confidence. All he had to do was believe in himself—

"......Erika-chan, what's wrong? Erika-chan!"

"Eh? What?"

"What do you mean 'Eh? What?'. What's up with you shutting yourself away all of a sudden? Are you worried about something?"

"Eh, yeah, now that you mention it, I am a little worried. Didn't I just say this one was close? Hopefully, the next match will be A-OK~."

Mizuki was successfully misled by her words and started talking about "Speaking of which", "Next time", "We'll cheer them on". Setting Mizuki aside for now, Erika once again delved into her inner sanctum.

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The seeding for the elimination round had been announced.

For the first match of the semifinal round, Third High was up against Eighth High.

In the second match, it was First High vs. Ninth High.

The results for the rotating preliminaries were First Place: Third High, Second Place: First High, Third Place: Eighth High, and Fourth Place: Ninth High. According to the rules, the semifinals should have pitted Third High vs. Ninth High and First High vs. Eighth High, but since First High already crossed swords with Eighth High in the preliminaries, they made another exception here.

The elimination round would begin in the afternoon.

While Tatsuya's match was the second one in the afternoon, they couldn't afford to miss out on Third High's match.

It was still a little early for lunch, so Tatsuya carried a bento box and accompanied Miyuki back to the hotel.

—It didn't appear that they could enjoy their lunch in peace at the pavilion.

Leo and Mikihiko had already evacuated back to their rooms to avoid the chaos.

Even though Honoka wanted to join them, if her presence caused an endless stream of well-wishers from their cohort to tag along, then fleeing the pavilion became meaningless. Shizuku stopped her by whispering this in her ear.

Finally shaking off the intrigued gazes — the majority were warm looks directed towards Miyuki — the siblings quickly moved away from the competition area and found a rare scene waiting for them in the hotel's lobby.

"Hm?"

"Wow......"

In the corner of the lobby, Mari was standing there with an embarrassed flush on her face.

Next to her, a slightly older young man was standing there.

Definitely less than a ten year difference. He was probably in his early to mid-twenties.

The siblings both knew that Mari was rumored to have an older lover.

Was this young man her partner?

He had a medium build without being overly tall, though he was slightly taller than Tatsuya. As could be attested by other people around him, his lanky build wasn't that of an athlete, but someone who has gone through martial and combat training. This was an obvious distinction in the siblings' eyes.

According to conventional wisdom, his delicate features labeled him a beautiful young man. While Mari's features were more neutral, she still qualified as a beautiful young woman. The two of them were a match made in heaven.

Suddenly, Tatsuya slowed down his pace.

"Onii-sama?"

Miyuki, who was half a step ahead now, turned her head to look at him.

Tatsuya was not playing a joke, nor was he planning anything devious like eavesdropping.

The young man's face was slightly familiar. After searching his memory for a moment, he stopped completely.

"......As expected of the Nine Schools Competition. You can expect to meet celebrities everywhere."

Now he was interested in their conversation. This thought only flashed through Tatsuya's mind briefly because he was well aware that this situation called for prudence.

"Do you know him?"

"He rates as an international celebrity."

At his side, Miyuki urged him to answer. Tatsuya originally planned to answer as they walked.

Still, while he stopped to recollect his thoughts, he didn't dare to actually "obstruct the date", but another fearless challenger appeared. A shrill voice caused both Tatsuya and Miyuki to halt their footsteps.

"Nii-sama! What are you doing here?!"

A familiar voice in a completely unfamiliar polite tone of voice addressed the young man.

"Nii-sama? Then this person is Erika's......?"

Miyuki switched her gaze from Erika, who was stomping towards the young man, to Tatsuya in hopes of confirmation.

"If my memory serves, he should be her second brother. The 'Chiba Kirin', Chiba Naotsugu. Currently studying at the University of National Defense, and reputed to be one of the finest magic close combat specialists in the world within a range of three meters."

"So he's that amazing. .....But, I would think that having such an older brother would be a great source of pride for Erika, but this open animosity seems out of sorts."

"Correct. While there are rumors that Naotsugu is an apostate within the Chiba Family...... Yet I hardly find Erika the type to be a stickler for the 'formalities'."

"Indeed......."

As the siblings were discussing this, Erika was in the process of tearing her brother a new one. -- And wholly ignoring Mari to one side.

"Nii-sama should be in Thailand serving as a swordsmanship trainer until next week! Why are you here now!?"

Erika was already burning with fury.

Normally, she was indifferent to the coming and goings of other people and the world at large. Today, this scene was certainly a surprise.

"Erika...... Settle down a little."

The young man — Chiba Naotsugu sought to calm his sister's towering fury, but this seemed to have no effect on Erika's animation.

"How can you tell me to settle down! I have no idea what Onii-sama would do, but I could never imagine that Nii-sama would abandon his post!"

"That's not it, calm down...... I didn't return by abandoning my post......"

Chiba Naotsugu appeared to be at odds with his fame, given his weak, or maybe gentle, disposition. In front of his little sister's agitation that showed no signs of diminishing before a crowd, he never scolded her and couldn't muster any defense save for a few excuses.

"Ho...... Is that so. Then as you said, cooperating with the Thai Royal Magicians and serving as a swordsmanship instructor was my complete misunderstanding?"

"Well, no, that part is just as Erika said...... But I didn't go AWOL, I was granted furlough......"

"Really. Since you had to put a diplomatic mission involving Japan and Thailand on hold, this surely must be a mission of absolute importance.

In that case, what is so important and demanding that Nii-sama was forced to return home and appear at a hotel reserved for a high school competition?"

In Tatsuya's eyes, Erika's tone may have improved, but her mood had plummeted straight down.

Naotsugu likely noticed this too.

As evidence of this fact, his face started cramping.

"No, it's not diplomatic or anything that grave...... It was only an exchange of goodwill for military officer candidates about to receive their postings, so it's nothing more than a university student exchange activity......"

"Nii-sama!"

"Present!"

"Goodwill exchange or not, student exchange activity or not, isn't that still an official mission?! That's not a reason for you to be lax on your duties!"

"Yes, just as you say!"

Seeing one of the world's finest reduced to such a state, Tatsuya could only gape in shock.

"......I've certainly heard of being hen-pecked, but I have no recollection of someone being whipped by his little sister......"

Feeling that the sight was too much for him, Tatsuya averted his gaze to find Mizuki fidgeting anxiously to one side. After waving her over, Mizuki seemed to relax somewhat and skitter over.

"Tatsuya-kun...... What's up with Erika-chan?"

"Seriously, what's going on......?"

Hearing Mizuki's question, Tatsuya could only shake his head in bewilderment.

"Onii-sama, I believe Erika is venting?"

Miyuki could barely contain her laughter bubbling up from within and gave Tatsuya this vague answer.

"Venting? Venting what?"

"You'll find out very soon."

More and more mystified, Tatsuya and company could only keep watching as this "sibling fight" turned a new corner.

"Nii-sama, don't tell me that you abandoned your post because you wanted to see this woman, did you?"

"Again, I already said I didn't abandon my post......"

"I don't want to hear that!"

Erika ruthlessly curtailed her brother's words and glared at Mari, who she had (likely consciously) ignored until now, before turning back to Naotsugu.

"Really, how appalling...... Nii-sama, known as the Chiba Kirin, would actually abandon his duty for this kind of woman......"

"......Erika, at the very least, I am still your senpai at school. I don't recall slighting you in any way to deserve being called 'this kind of woman'?"

Up to this point, Mari patiently endured in silence, but finally broke her silence to interject.

Yet Erika completely ignored Mari's words.

"Speaking of which, I do believe that Nii-sama fell from grace after starting a relationship with this woman. A swordsman that mastered the Arts of the Thousand Blades neglected to practice his training and became infatuated with those petty magic tricks......"

"Erika!"

For Naotsugu, that must be a taboo subject. He shed his gentle nature like an actor removing a mask. Faced with this blistering castigation, Erika quivered in shock.

"In order to hone the talent, one must always absorb new techniques.

This is what I believe and have always done.

This has nothing to do with Mari.

After hearing Mari got hurt, I was the one who could not sit still.

Even so, Mari told me that it's fine if I couldn't make it.

In spite of this, from the very start, as a daughter of the Chiba Family, you should be ashamed of your behavior!"

"............"

She bit her lip in silence, but even so, Erika never shifted her gaze from Naotsugu.

"Come, Erika. Apologize to Mari."

"......Never."

"Erika!"

"I refuse! It's true that Nii-sama dropped his official task to come here! And all because of that woman!"

Once again, the tables turned.

"I'll never budge on this point! Nii-sama started to degenerate after going out with that woman!"

Erika swiftly pivoted and fled from her brother with rapid footsteps.

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"Erika-chan, hold up, Erika-chan!"

By the time she reached the elevator — and completely out of sight of the lobby, Erika finally turned around to face Mizuki's voice.

Then, she opened her mouth to form an "Oh".

"......Tatsuya-kun. Miyuki as well...... Don't tell me both of you heard that?"

Her tone and expression were both typical of Erika.

Yet, Tatsuya's instincts told him that Erika was barely holding back her tears.

"I apologize...... We didn't mean to."

"Tatsuya-kun, this time you foot the bill."

"What!? ......Fine, you win. Please be merciful."

"Negotiations complete."

Erika revealed her usual flighty and carefree smile.

Given that she had already adopted her usual facade, if Tatsuya overly pampered her, she would only raise her guard, which would defeat the entire purpose.

"Erika, have you eaten lunch?"

"Hm? It's still early..... Eh, OK. I haven't eaten yet, so let's go together."

At Miyuki's question, Erika gave a noncommittal answer.

"Onii-sama?"

"Fine. We were going to eat in the room anyway. If you don't mind, would you like to join us?"

"Sure, I'll go! Mizuki, want to come too?"

"OK, then excuse me."

"Please, you're not a bother at all."

"Eh? That's not what I meant!"

"Seriously...... Tatsuya-kun, picking on others is too much."

Mizuki was still in a bad mood because she was used as a tool to lighten the mood.

However, she wasn't really holding it against him, this point was obvious. Tatsuya smiled wryly as he took a large bite out of his sandwich.

Mizuki and Tatsuya both pretended to be oblivious to what happened earlier, so they didn't raise the subject again.

"Then...... Tatsuya-kun, Miyuki, Mizuki, do you guys have anything you wanted to ask me about?"

Still, the person in question — Erika, was ready to reopen Pandora's Box.

"The person going out with Watanabe-senpai seems to be Erika's older brother."

Miyuki was the only one who deftly answered the conversation in a carefree manner.

"Yep. That stupid brother of mine, it's both pitiful and infuriating at the same time that he's been conned by that woman......"

"Isn't he a world-class swordsman? Even if you don't praise him, I don't think you should refer to him as 'stupid brother of mine', right?"

"Eh? ......Ah, so that's how it is. If it's Tatsuya-kun, it wouldn't be surprising if you knew about Naotsugu Nii-san."

"E-ri-ka. Even though you're with us, you don't have to change your words, OK? Isn't it Naotsugu Nii-sama?"

"Ah~, forget about that! That's totally not like me!"

Erika wrapped her hands around her head and buried her head into the bed.

Apparently, the term "decorous" caused her no end of embarrassment.

......Compared to that, he was hoping that she would be more embarrassed about burying her head into a pillow that a man uses. Tatsuya thought worriedly.

"OK, OK. So Erika likes Naotsugu-san."

"............"

Erika wasn't the only one who froze.

Miyuki's frost bomb instantly turned Tatsuya and Mizuki into ice cubes.

"......No way in hell!"

Erika leaped to her feet and screamed.

Owing to the fact that her face was buried in the pillow as she started to reply, the only words they heard was "in hell". To be able to respond so swiftly in that situation was certainly worthy of praise.

Miyuki laughed merrily as if a cornered beast had let out a furious, but easily understood, bellow.

And dropped an even more explosive bomb.

"So, Erika. You turned out to have a Brother Complex!"

"Wha......"

Erika gaped at that.

The following explosion far surpassed her critical point.

"I don't want to hear that from you! You hardcore bro-con girl!"

—As to what happened afterwards, Tatsuya and Mizuki kept that to themselves.

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"......Hey, Tatsuya, you're looking pretty bad, eh? Are you alright?"

"Somehow, you look exhausted......"

When Tatsuya arrived at the audience stands, the first thing he heard was Leo and Mikihiko commenting on him.

"I'm a little tired. It's nothing really, it's more emotional exhaustion than mental stress. I'll be fine if I concentrate during the match."

Tatsuya waved his hands in a casual manner. On the other side, Miyuki and Erika sat down as if nothing had occurred.

Behind them, Mizuki's actions were slightly suspicious, but neither Leo nor Mikihiko noticed, since all of their focus was on the upcoming match.

"......Sorry. Looks like we're letting Tatsuya draw all the fire."

Mikihiko kindly (intentionally?) misinterpreted this.

"No, that's hardly the case. Relax, don't worry about it."

While the words "that's hardly the case" meant nothing of the sort, the fact that Tatsuya chose to respond in a dubious manner showed that he also possessed a slightly twisted personality.

"As long as you're alright. Tatsuya really took it too far last round, so don't push yourself!"

"I'll keep that in mind."

I am not worthy of such a kindhearted friend, Tatsuya thought.

"I'm keeping tabs on that as well, so don't worry about it."

He never intended to have such an honest friend worry about him. Hence, Tatsuya made an earnest effort to nod his head in agreement.

Still, once the match began, how grave his face became was no longer important.

Their attention — of course, Tatsuya included — was currently drawn away by the match between Third and Eighth High in the "rocky" setting.

Surpassing all their expectations, the match was a complete landslide.

Actually, it may be more appropriate to describe this as a solo performance.

Following the "Open Field", the Karst-like "Boulders" had the least amount of obstacles in the setting. While there were large boulders jutting out across the area, their difference in height wasn't noticeable, nor were there any trees to obstruct vision.

One player moved out of Third High's field and leisurely paced from between the boulders.

Heedless of any hostile fire, Ichijou Masaki "advanced" while disdaining to rely on any cover.

Nor was Eighth High just standing there helplessly as they continuously unleashed magic on Masaki's position. Even the attacker who was advancing on Third High's position from the shadows of the boulders was pouring on the fire.

Even so.

Masaki's pace faltered not.

The rocky fragments hurtled by Move-Type Magic were thrown away by even stronger Move-Type Magic.

Weight-Type and Oscillation-Type Magic fired at him were nullified by a wide area interference barrier that extended in a one meter radius around him.

As if mocking the "pointless gestures", Masaki's pace was slow and leisurely.

"......'Armor of Interference', eh. Move-Type Wide Area Interference should be the Juumonji Family's specialty."

Leo and Mikihiko were both struck speechless by this overpowering might. On the other hand, Tatsuya was the master of himself as he praised Masaki's strengths.

"To be able to freely wield this type of magic without breathing raggedly likely requires more than a large capacity within the magic calculation area. Looks like he's very adept at 'cyclical breathing'. I guess that should be called innate talent."

When continuously using the same magic, cyclical breathing referred to the space between when one magic ends and the next one begins. The less overlap between the first and second magic, the less stress was placed on the Magician. Magicians who excelled in shortening the dead time between the two were known as "adept at cyclical breathing".

Miyuki was also a Magician "adept at cyclical breathing", but in Tatsuya's eyes, Masaki possessed a talent that rivaled Miyuki's.

In face of the unyielding defense, the attacker from Eighth High stopped his assault.

He frantically hid and charged towards Third High's position.

He gave up on bringing down Masaki and chose to assault the enemy's monolith in hopes of pulling out a victory from the jaws of defeat.

Alas, his choice was overly reckless.

Probably because it was made in a panic.

With his attention completely in front of him and exposing his defenseless back, how could someone like Masaki let this opportunity simply pass by?

After suffering a point blank explosive shock wave, the attacker from Eighth was flung face first into the dirt.

"Convergence-Systematic 'Bias Release'. Simply using compression and release would be sufficient...... He's certainly someone who likes to put on a show."

"Bias Release, right? I've never heard of that magic."

"That's because it's a highly convoluted and inefficient, second rate magic.

For example, it's like pumping air into one side of a can and sealing it, then opening the other end towards the target. Compared with normal air, that sort of concentrated compressed air would strike with greater force and higher control over the direction of the force, so these are some possible advantages. But if it's only to increase the output, it would be far better to simply increase the amount of compression. If he wanted to add vectors to the attack, then direct contact with the compressed air would be sufficient.

......No, he's trying to decrease the power of the blow, hence he used a combination of the two.

Being overpowered is truly a hassle in this circumstance."

Tatsuya revealed an ironic smirk.

Miyuki gave him a look that said "Isn't Onii-sama the same way?", but he pretended to be oblivious.

While Tatsuya was explaining the mechanics, Masaki continued to close in on Eighth High's position.

Likely arriving at the conclusion that simply waiting was no solution, the two remaining defenders combined their strength to challenge Masaki.

The boulders split apart and rushed towards Masaki.

The Release-Systematic Magic used by the players from Eighth High set off a shower of electrons from the minerals, causing sparks to erupt around Masaki's feet.

Regardless of the scale of the former or the difficulty level of the latter, both were of the highest caliber magic — which was no exaggeration.

When Tatsuya's team dueled Eighth High, their victory only appeared easy because they never gave their opponent the chance to put their best foot forward. If it was a head-to-head shootout, the battle undoubtedly would have been a very stiff contest.

However, Masaki easily nullified their full frontal combined assault.

The scattered fragments were flung away by a sphere of reverse vectors centered around Masaki, while the electric discharge was suppressed before it even started.

A block of air hammered into the players from Eighth High.

Upon contact with the released compressed air, the two of them were swiftly and easily incapacitated.

The ending signal sounded immediately.

For the entire duration of the match, Kichijouji and their other teammate stood stock still in Third High's field and contributed nothing to the overall result.

"He has far exceeded our expectations, this 'Prince' of the Ichijou Family......"

Mayumi said to Katsuto as she shifted her gaze away from the screen.

Her usual companion Mari wasn't present.

Currently, Mari was preoccupied to the point that "whoever disturbed her would rue that day".

Originally, she should have been confined to bed rest, but Mayumi and the other members of the brass turned a blind eye.

"Somehow I feel that he's very similar to Juumonji-kun."

Even if someone said they were similar, this would probably be a hard sentiment for Katsuto to respond to.

As expected, before he was able to reply, Suzune had joined the conversation already.

"That may be intentional. The combat dogma for the Ichijou Family revolves around proactively controlling the initiative through medium to long range bombardment. Today in the rotating preliminaries, he used long distance attacks to annihilate the defenders. I don't have a real basis for this but...... I think this may be Ichijou-kun throwing down the gauntlet."

"A challenge?"

At Mayumi tilting her head, Katsuto answered her.

"I'm not certain if he's conscious of my style, but I think he's calling out Shiba to 'trade shots with him if he dares'."

"Hm...... I can understand that feeling."

Mayumi's expression seemed to say: how childish.

Tatsuya's strengths lay in mobility, analysis, and his ability to surprise.

Compared to his Magic Power, it was his combat ability that was more striking, which the two matches today clearly testified to.

How could Tatsuya be taken in by such blatant baiting, Mayumi thought.

Yet, Katsuto didn't receive that wordless communication, so he continued onward.

"Shiba will most likely accept that challenge."

"Eh? Tatsuya-kun?"

"At the original distance, he has no chance of victory. This may be his only opportunity."

"I don't believe it, that's simply......"

In the audience stands far from the main pavilion, of course there was no way for Katsuto's opinion to reach Tatsuya's ears. Nonetheless, Katsuto's point was mirrored in Tatsuya's mind.

He was also aware that this may be Third High's, and Kichijouji Shinkurou's in particular, real intention: to reveal the only way for him to emerge victorious while at the same time forcing a direct confrontation.

The tricky part was, besides accepting their opponent's invitation, First High didn't have any other options that had a higher chance for victory.

(Well played, "Cardinal George"......)

"Seriously, what kind of defensive ability is that!"

"In the end, the only thing we caught a glimpse of was Ichijou-kun, which was our mistake. This way, we have no way to plan for our encounter."

Leo and Mikihiko must have misinterpreted Tatsuya's comment.

The two of them seemed to be overwhelmed by Masaki's strength, but at least they were better off than he was. He was in the process of being devoured slowly by this quicksand hell, so they undoubtedly suffered less mental stress than he did.

"In regards to Kichijouji-kun, I have a rough estimate. I have no idea about the third person though."

"Oh, really?"

Tatsuya proceeded to correct their misinterpretation.

"The 'Cardinal Code' that Kichijouji Shinkurou discovered is a fundamental code used in Weight-Type Magic and he appeared in Speed Shooting.

Thus, his favored magic would probably be 'Invisible Bullet', which applies increased weight to select points."

"Cardinal Code?"

"So he's not altering the target's Eidos but only applying increased weight to a certain portion, but is that possible?"

"Well...... Looks like this explanation will take some time, is that fine?"

At Tatsuya's query, Leo hesitated briefly, but Mikihiko immediately nodded.

"Within Magic Sequence research, there is a theory known as the 'Cardinal Code Hypothesis'.

There is considerable popular support behind this theory. There are the Four Great Systems and Eight Major Types, 'Speed', 'Weight', 'Movement', 'Oscillation', 'Convergence', 'Dispersal', 'Absorption', and 'Release' as well as their corresponding positive and negative poles for a total of 16 fundamental Magic Sequences. This theory believes that, through the various combinations of these 16 Magic Sequences, any magic from any of the major systems can be created.

Meanwhile, the Magic Sequence that serves as the basic building block is called the 'Cardinal Code'.

In summation...... It is capable of constructing any and all the Systematic magics. Strictly on this point, the theory is incorrect, but the 'Cardinal Code' truly exists."

"......The theory is incorrect but the code exists?"

"......Sorry, you lost me."

Faced with Mikihiko and Leo's responses, Tatsuya waved his hand as if to say "Don't be hasty".

"Calm down, let me go over it again slowly.

There is magic within the Four Great Systems that cannot be created by the 16 'Cardinal Codes' no matter what combination you try, hence the Cardinal Code theory is incorrect. Then again, based on its fundamental principles, there does exist a Magic Sequence that is capable of being a building block.

Within modern magic, certain effects will take place after redefining the status of an object after phenomenon rewriting.

While the driving force behind the change has been defined within the Magic Sequence, this driving force would not exist without a definition of what happens after the magic has affected the target.

However, Cardinal Codes are able to create the driving force themselves.

In other words, Cardinal Codes are Magic Sequences that literally define 'Speed', 'Weight', 'Movement', 'Oscillation', 'Convergence', 'Dispersal', 'Absorption', and 'Release'.

Thus, rather than having an overall effect on the Eidos themselves, these act on a single object — and render them possible.

Currently, the only discovered Cardinal Code on record is the one from Weight-Type Magic.

And the one responsible for that discovery is Kichijouji Shinkurou of Third High — 'Cardinal George'."

Hearing the last few words, Mikihiko displayed a cowed expression.

"Kichijouji Shinkurou, no wonder I thought that name sounded familiar...... So he's 'Cardinal George'!"

Seeing his face, Tatsuya thought: "Damn it." Regardless, he had already said the words, so there was nothing he could do about it.

"Exactly. So Ichijou-kun isn't the only one we have to be on guard against. While it is true that talented researchers are not necessarily talented users, so long as he is capable of wielding the 'Cardinal Code', he will be a fearsome opponent."

Magic that relies on the Cardinal Code has no need to define the altered phenomenon that is mandatory in normal magic because the driving force itself has been defined. Under this condition — where force is applied unilaterally, the magic that directly involved Tatsuya in Monolith Code, 'Battering Ram', and 'Invisible Bullet' share the same characteristics, but 'Battering Ram' required additional force — especially on the point of attack — in order to rewrite the entire phenomenon. Compared to that, 'Invisible Bullet' had no need to rewrite the surface that force was applied on — regardless of whether it was a wall, the surface, or even the human body. 'Invisible Bullet' was a magic that directly improved the force itself.

Since it was not rewriting the entire Eidos, the Magic Sequence needed to rewrite only the necessary portion is naturally going to be smaller. Because this was not altering the Eidos of the target itself, 'Data Fortification' — abilities that defended against rewriting the Eidos — was unable to defend against it.

Smaller Magic Sequences and the ability to influence the Eidos in spite of Data Fortification makes this a powerful advantage for using this type of magic.

"Fortunately, 'Invisible Bullet' was hampered by the absolute necessity of visual confirmation. Rather than relying on the Eidos, a direct confirmation of the object was a necessary, but ironic, handicap. Owing to this handicap, cover was a useful defense against the attacks from 'Invisible Bullet'. While Wide Area Interference is viable, Data Fortification is no defense, so be very careful!"

"Got it. I will be extra careful."

"Ho...... I still don't understand one point."

After Mikihiko nodded in understanding, Leo politely opened his mouth.

"What is it Leo?"

"This doesn't really have anything to do with the match...... Tatsuya, earlier you said something about 'there are magics that cannot be constructed by the 16 Cardinal Codes', right? In other words, Tatsuya knows all 16 of the Cardinal Codes?"

Though his attitude and tone might claim otherwise, Leo was no fool in his own right.

Setting aside general knowledge, he was still highly intelligent.

Tatsuya was well aware of this, but was still caught by surprise by this keen statement.

"......Currently, Kichijouji Shinkurou is the only one who has discovered a Cardinal Code. I only know that there are magics within the Four Major Systems that cannot be created by the Cardinal Code Hypothesis."

"Onii-sama, isn't it time to go?"

Leo opened his mouth — he wanted to ask another question but was interrupted by Miyuki.

"You're right. They're about to announce the setting for the next match. Let's return to the pavilion."

Upon rising, Tatsuya's figure denied any more follow up questions.

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The match against Ninth High was set in a "Valley" setting.

The layout of the arena was an artificial valley shaped like a Japanese "<". If the water was moving, there would be a difference between being upriver or downriver, hence rather than being referred to as a valley, this was also described as a long "<" shaped lake surrounded by cliffs. No, it wasn't deep enough to be a lake (the greatest depth was only 50 cm or so), so maybe it should be called a "<" shaped "pond".

This match was the perfect stage for Mikihiko's solo performance.

A white fog covered the entire length of the arena.

From the side of the completely blinded audience came a loud shushing noise before all returned to silence.

After all, for the audience to be so affected by the magic competition and the sheer difficulty of maintaining this magic was quite telling on who owned the advantage.

In addition, the First High players were only covered by light fog whereas the players from Ninth High were enshrouded in a dense fog.

Under the effect of the mist, the players from Ninth High had great difficulty approaching the First High monolith.

They repeatedly sought to dispel the mist, but after several half-successful attempts to blow the mist away, the pure white cover swiftly returned to rob them of their sight as if mocking their efforts.

Even if they summoned the wind to blow away the mist, the replacement air was still filled with mist, making this a pointless gesture. Also, any attempt to raise the temperature only prompted the "lake" to evaporate and increase the unpleasantness.

The Ancient Magic responsible for creating this "Barrier" of mist was unrelated to the level of moisture and simply congregated the vapor in the air. Even if the temperature was raised, this would only increase the amount of water vapor and make the mist even thicker. "Barrier" Magic naturally included the "Sealing" concept, so even manipulating the air currents would only cycle the air filled with mist.

Fundamentally, trying to sustain magic on a vague target was one of the weaker areas of modern magic.

In order to use modern magic to dispel this "Magical Mist", they had to identify the magic that Mikihiko used to create this area — "Barrier", otherwise no countermeasure would be effective. The new students from Ninth High appeared to be lacking in their knowledge of Ancient Magic.

Besides having a slightly denser cloud of artificial mist hanging over the area, there was nothing that surpassed the laws of nature.

Since there was no paradoxical effect, there were no signs of the magic weakening. Likewise, there was no effect that locked people in place.

The only aspect directly being restricted was visibility and subsequently, mobility.

The attackers from Ninth High advanced along the cliffs with trepidation. Tatsuya took a quick glance before diving into the mist and easily arriving at Ninth High's position.

The mist intentionally became thinner around his immediate position, which wasn't a problem to maintain if he was only walking quickly. Then again, even if there was zero visibility, that would pose little problem to Tatsuya anyway.

Here, he didn't have to worry about the audience watching him, so he could freely use his vision to identify the entities around him.

Looping behind the unsuspecting defender from Ninth High, Tatsuya fired the "key" into the monolith.

Upon hearing the "outer lid" of the monolith falling away, the defender frantically whirled around, but Tatsuya had long since evacuated.

This time, Tatsuya didn't need to summon the spirits.

Mikihiko was the one controlling the spirit that upheld the barrier of mist. Within this mist, nothing could escape Mikihiko's "eyes".

The match between First and Ninth High ended in First High's victory without a single shot being fired.

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The finals would take place after the compensatory round.

Regardless of how long matches lasted, each match for Monolith Code never exceeded 30 minutes. Thus, the finals were comfortably set for 3:30 PM, which was two hours from now.

Tatsuya was in charge of CAD calibration, so he opted to stay in the competition area for the next two hours, but Mikihiko and Leo needed to blow off some steam, so they left the competition area.

—There's no way he could last if he saw those siblings sticking together like glue again. Maybe that was the reason why......

They arranged to meet up one hour before the match, so how they spent their time until then was their personal choice.

Leo said he wanted to grab a bite from the cafeteria before heading back to his room to rest.

Mikihiko wasn't as gluttonous, so he elected to visit the tourism room on the highest floor of the hotel.

The hotel was erected near the Fuji Exercise Grounds, so the tourism room had a direct view of Mt. Fuji.

The "Divine Earth Magic" of the Yoshida Family was Ancient Magic that belonged to the Shinto System and more specifically the branch concerned with Earth Deities within the Shinto System (deification of the country).

Mt. Fuji had a special meaning for Magicians who used Ancient Magic from the Shinto system.

The god enshrined at Mt. Fuji was joined with one of the heavenly gods, so Mt. Fuji was worshiped by both heaven and earth denominations.

Even excluding this religious meaning, "Spiritual Mt. Fuji" was a locale that powerful magics revolved around.

Walking out onto the exposed balcony of the tourism room was like bathing in the mountain's aura. Mikihiko had this in mind as he ascended to the highest level, but there was an unexpected individual waiting for him.

"Ah, Mikihiko-kun, why are you here?"

The one turned to ask him was Erika, who was wearing a straw hat to shade herself from the sun as she placed her elbows on the railing and gazed upward towards Mt. Fuji.

"I came to see Mt. Fuji...... Erika, why are you here alone?"

As Mikihiko said, the tourism room — including the exposed balcony on the highest level — was empty save for Erika's presence.

No, Mikihiko was here now, so the amount doubled.

This was only natural, considering all the visitors today would naturally be here for the Nine Schools Competition.

Even though it was the break period, the match for Third Place was about to start soon. Besides Mikihiko, who had a special reason for visiting, anyone choosing to visit this tourism room that could only see Mt. Fuji now must have brain damage.

"I probably wanted to be alone for a while."

Seeing Erika turn her gaze back to the scenery and the loneliness accompanying her face, Mikihiko felt a little flustered.

This was hardly the time to retreat or just stand there, so he had no choice — at least his consciousness told him he "had no choice" — but to sidle along Erika.

"Mikihiko-kun."

Erika spoke with her gaze still fixated on Japan's highest mountain.

"Eh, what?"

—Something's awry.

"Don't you feel it?"

"Eh?"

"You came to bathe in the aura of the mountain, right? Are you properly soaking it in?"

Though the words were the same, her voice was altogether different.

It was as if her tone was just as usual, but still different at the same time.

Leaning against the railing, Erika's expression was incredibly earnest, more sincere than any time in the past four months, nay, the last couple years.

The last time he saw this expression was before she cut her hair short, when it was even longer than when she allowed it to grow out last spring. Two years ago, she never loosened her grip on the sword in her hand......

"......Mikihiko-kun?"

"Ah, sorry. Uh, yeah, just as Erika said."

Mikihiko stammered a reply and finally realized what was wrong.

— Erika was calling him "Mikihiko" —

"I came to soak in the aura."

"Not that."

"Eh?"

"I'm not asking that. ......Are you properly feeling the aura around the mountain?"

Stupefied by her oddly intent gaze, Mikihiko braced himself and adjusted his breathing.

He expelled all the air within his lungs and breathed deep.

Maintaining a proper pace was important, but imagination was even more so.

He was taking in and releasing the air in controlled motions.

And he wasn't breathing in and expelling, but expelling and then breathing.

After taking two or three breaths Mikihiko's body was suffused with power. This wasn't like the "crumbs" from psions or pushions, but was something closer to the original oscillations of the waves, also known as a "power" called "prana".

Mikihiko perfectly absorbed the prana surrounding the peaks. After verifying this with her own eyes, Erika let out a restrained smile that was wholly unlike her.

—A somewhat lonely smile.

"Erika......?"

"See, you still have it in you!"

"......I'm sorry, but I have no idea what you're talking about."

This wouldn't be the first time someone had spouted some abstract comment without sparing a thought towards others, but today, Mikihiko felt that it was more like his fault for not understanding her.

"Mikihiko-kun, have you noticed? Today, you were able to wield magic like before the incident, when you were known as the 'prodigy of the Yoshida Family'!"

"Eh?"

"No, you're not the same as before, you have made great strides compared to then. Regardless of whether it was Sense Tuning, the barrier of Mist, the absorption of prana, they have become as natural as breathing for you."

He didn't say: how is it possible.

Likewise, Mikihiko didn't say, why would you say that.

He was well aware what sort of "eye" the "Swordsman of Chiba" Erika possessed.

"Isn't that wonderful!"

With a sudden "pah" and a slap on the back, Mikihiko nearly staggered.

"In this state, Miki has nothing to fear from Third High! Go get them!"

"My name is Mikihiko!"

Erika suddenly reverted to her usual state and departed without a reply. Mikihiko finally relaxed as he called out his usual response to her retreating back.

Exactly why he did so or what he was concerned about did not cross Mikihiko's mind.

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Tatsuya, who should be stuck with his sister like glue (that was only the wild mass guessing from their teammates), was summoned to the entrance of the grounds shortly after the two departed.

"Ono-sensei, thank you for your hard work."

Haruka was the one who called him out here.

"Hey, saying thank you for your hard work to an elder...... You're aware of what you're saying, right?"

At Tatsuya's mischievous smirk, Haruka's shoulders drooped helplessly.

"......I guess that's what my position has turned into...... A supporting actor whose secrets have been exposed, only to be buried within the 'ignorant masses'......"

"What are you talking about. You're spouting nonsense."

"No worries. I'm a nonsensical woman anyway."

"......I think it's about time you returned what I placed in your keeping. I don't have much time."

Seeing Tatsuya reach out a hand, Haruka playfully sighed.

Even if she didn't say it, her expression clearly said: "Can't you cooperate a little." Despite this, she understood that time was of the essence, so she obediently handed the electric carrier (carry-on baggage with electric wheels attached to facilitate movement) over to Tatsuya.

"Seriously...... I really wish someone would actually reward me a little. I'm a life counselor, not an errand boy."

"Our sensei was the one who asked Ono-sensei to do this, not me. Still...... Let me think for a moment. If you're unhappy with these trivial tasks, allow me to ask you something more in line with your actual job."

"No, it's not like I wanted an actual task."

"It's tax-free income...... You really don't want it?"

Haruka's eyes sparkled with an easily understood wavering.

......Is this sort of kind disposition (and not "personality") truly suited for intelligence work? Tatsuya watched her in a taunting manner.

He didn't have to wait very long.

"......I give up. It's our duty to assist students deviating from the right path. This isn't the time to say I'm off duty or I haven't got the time."

So, she was looking for an excuse to make this easier on herself, Tatsuya thought.

However—

"Alas, that's not the task I had in mind. I'm referring to your other line of work."

"......What exactly do you want me to do?"

Haruka was immediately on high alert.

Is it really alright for her to be this transparent? This time, Tatsuya was seriously concerned.

Forget it, even if she messed up by feigning silliness and punished with "this" and "that", those were not related to him in any way.

"No Head Dragon...... I want to know the current HQ for the Hong Kong International Criminal Organization 'No Head Dragon'."

Haruka frantically glanced around them and closed in on Tatsuya as if she was going to hug him.

"How do you know about No Head Dragon!?"

While her tone was agitated, Haruka didn't forget to lower her volume as she asked him. Still, even if she asked, this wasn't a question he could answer. Tatsuya's relationship with Kazama and the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion was still classified. That was a direct order from their aunt, the current head of the Yotsuba Family. Even if he answered with something like "I heard it from somewhere else", there was no guarantee that some trace of this relationship could not be exposed.

"It's only natural that I would investigate the culprits intending to do me harm."

Hence Tatsuya chose this vague answer that could be applied towards anything. Nevertheless, Haruka correctly interpreted this to mean the recent obstructions in the Nine Schools Competition.

"......What devilry are you up to now? 'Public Safety' and 'Internal Affairs' have both been mobilized for this case. There's no need for Shiba-kun to act on this!"

Haruka was still whispering. From their posture, any bystander would mistake this for a troublesome relationship.

Miyuki posed no difficulty, so long as Honoka, Shizuku, or any of the others didn't see them, Tatsuya thought.

"Currently, there are no wheels in motion. Still, if retaliation becomes necessary, but the enemy's location remains unknown, that would be a little troubling. ......Speaking of which, I think our current proximity may cause some misunderstanding."

Haruka quickly jerked back.

Maybe this came from an elder's pride, but she was using a placating smile to cover her internal discomfiture.

It's about time to seriously advise her to abandon the intelligence work, Tatsuya thought.

......That being said, he never thought of retracting his request.

"......Insurance, is it?"

"That interpretation would be acceptable."

After carefully examining him, she swiftly nodded.

"......Understood. Give me one day."

"Impressive! You only need one day?"

This was pure, worry-free praise.

Haruka was someone who wore her heart on her sleeve and could only smile in embarrassment.

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As Tatsuya dragged the electric carrier back to the pavilion, the students on duty all gazed at him with interest. Completely ignoring the fact that he was the center of attention, Tatsuya retrieved something from the bag.

"......Wind breakers?"

Mayumi approached Tatsuya with nary a thought and asked as she examined the object in his hands.

"No, these are mantles."

Tatsuya raised the black fabric and unfurled them.

It was a Western mantle that would extend to the floor even on someone of his height.

"Those too?"

"Those are robes."

After depositing the black mantle on the table, this time he pulled out a gray fabric. This one was a long robe with a hood attached.

"What...... exactly are you going to do with these?"

There were "?" marks floating all over the pavilion. Only Miyuki could tell at first glance and couldn't help but burst into laughter.

"That's for the match. Thankfully, they made it in time."

"Onii-sama, wouldn't that be against the rules?"

Setting aside the completely confused Mayumi and the others, Miyuki asked Tatsuya with a degree of seriousness.

"I don't believe there will be a problem since we handed in the CADs in time. The rule book didn't say that we are forbidden from wearing uniforms inscribed with magic themselves."

Hearing his answer to Miyuki, the number of "?" marks on Mayumi's head increased by one as she asked Tatsuya.

"Magic inscriptions?"

"Correct. This is done by combining the principle of Engraving Magic with the mediums from Ancient Magic. The mantle and robe include enchantments that facilitate the user using magic."

"Supplementary effects...... There should be no problem if no specific technique was incorporated within......"

Feeling Mayumi's gaze, Suzune nodded as she replied.

"There is no violation here. Specifically, there isn't a rule for something that complex."

"If there is a problem, we can just abandon them. It's not like we cannot give battle without them."

Mayumi slightly creased her eyebrows as Tatsuya turned around.

"Hey, Tatsuya-kun."

Her anxiety far outweighed the unease in her voice.

"Since we're still in the competition, everyone has kept a lid on the celebratory mood. The moment we advanced to the finals, our victory in the Newcomers Division was already assured. So please, don't push yourself too much!"

"Understood."

Even without her saying so, Tatsuya had already largely given up on this match.

—Because at this time, we haven't......

After leaving the examination of the mantles and robes to Isori (the Isori Family were renowned for their expertise in Engraving Magic, not that Isori himself hid his personal interest either), Tatsuya left the pavilion to relax himself.

When he was appointed as one of the substitutes, the mission he received from Mayumi was to clinch First High's victory in the Newcomers Division.

The moment they advanced to the finals of Monolith Code — in other words, right now, Tatsuya had already accomplished his objective.

He was carefully warming up to prevent injury during the match.

Bruises or scratches were meaningless to him, but if there was a major fracture or artery being severed, he had to take precautions against his classified abilities automatically activating.

Even if he could voluntarily halt the process, whether he could do so in time was another story. His personal restoration ability would immediately complete the repair processes in the blink of an eye.

The Nine Schools Competition was being recorded. Even if no one could consciously catch the instant this occurred, future playbacks could still capture the moment.

As if reminding himself all over again, he continued to work through his exercises. During this, Miyuki also left the pavilion, but seeing as she wasn't on urgent business, Tatsuya allowed himself to finish his calisthenics.

"Onii-sama, please take this towel."

She handed him a sublimely wet and cold towel.

Miyuki had been standing for a considerable amount of time in the blazing summer heat, yet the towel felt as if it was freshly removed from the icebox...... Upon learning that this was her area of expertise, this fact was no longer surprising.

By paying attention to all the minute details, she was certainly a sister who pampered him, Tatsuya thought.

In normal circumstances, hordes of men would undoubtedly pursue her at the cost of their lives.

No, even in the present, his sister was still probably capable of sending men to their doom with a word. Even setting himself aside, though he would probably be the first man into the breach, Tatsuya felt a slight chill as he considered his sister's future.

"Onii-sama, is there something on my face?"

Even though she didn't seriously believe that something was on her face, Miyuki had no other way of interrogating her brother who was watching her with an indecipherable expression.

—Tatsuya didn't answer. Answering would only muddy the issue.

"Onii-sama......"

At Tatsuya muddling through the question, Miyuki didn't press onward.

"......It's almost time for the finals. Our next opponent will be a difficult one......"

"......Indeed."

Bluffing was irrelevant at this point.

Even if this wasn't a competition and live battle instead, with both sides going all out without restrains, Tatsuya had no confidence that he could "triumph" over the two of them at the same time, nay even if he was against Ichijou Masaki alone.

"Under a state of restricted power and ability ...... for one who belongs to the side that restricts such as myself, to go and say such a thing is illogical, and may arouse your displeasure, but......"

Miyuki hesitated briefly as she slowly drooped her head, losing her nerve to speak each time.

Then, she resolutely raised her head and shyly declared.

"......Even so, I have faith that Onii-sama will not lose to anyone!"

Without waiting for Tatsuya's reply, she turned back to the pavilion with the lightness of a sparrow. Watching his sister's departing figure, Tatsuya stood there for some time.

(Seriously, as you will......)

As Miyuki herself said, she was one of the key cogs within the system that limited Tatsuya's abilities.

One of the key reasons behind why he was unable to use his true strength to display his indomitable might was undoubtedly Miyuki.

That being said, Tatsuya didn't believe — that Miyuki was so willful.

Faith that he would not lose to anyone was the hope of she who wished of him to remain unbeatable.

Tatsuya's intellect was not mature enough to completely understand the subtleties behind this.

Yet, Tatsuya could understand these feelings.

Maybe he should say he was able to understand it only because Miyuki was the one who made the wish of him.

This was not someone giving orders or instructions, but a mental characteristic that was naturally expressing itself.

As you will, referred to exactly that.

Defeat was no longer an option in the next match.

But as the saying goes, easier said than done.

No matter how he calculated the matter, the odds were stacked against him. Tatsuya couldn't help but sigh at this.

◊ ◊ ◊

After the end of the consolation game, the setting for the final match was announced to be the "Open Field".

Hearing this, both sides had equally illuminating reactions.

In Third High's pavilion, there were even cheers of victory.

"You called it, George."

"We got lucky, Masaki."

While they managed to rein in their reactions to the news, the two of them failed to hide their elated smiles.

"Now it comes down to whether that guy takes the bait......"

"He will. On the open fields with no cover whatsoever, he has no other options aside from throwing down in a one-on-one shootout."

"He'll try to break through there because that guy has 'Gram Demolition' as a trump card, eh......"

"Precisely, Masaki.

While his tactics smack of ambushes and surprise, in reality everything is founded on a complex series of calculations.

If he knows that there are no direct countermeasures, he may still choose the road less traveled and elect to spring out a surprise attack.

However, since he can still use 'Gram Demolition' as a direct counter, logically, he would choose the avenue of attack that has the highest chance of success."

"While you will suppress the defender and the guerrilla."

"The defender isn't the problem. His Fortifying Magic seems legit, but there's nothing else to write home about.

The guerrilla player...... Seems to specialize in Ancient Magic. Based on his name, he's most likely a Magician from the 'Yoshida Family'. The fact that he remains a complete mystery does give one pause, but when compared to Ancient Magic, modern magic owns the decisive edge in speed. Without any cover on the open plains, this is definitely in our advantage."

"Furthermore, you still have an ace in the hole with the 'Cardinal Code'."

"Unfortunately, our opponents seized the Newcomers Division crown from us...... But at the very least, Monolith Code will belong to us!"

"Exactly, leave it to me!"

Hearing Kichijouji's words, Masaki nodded boldly.

"The 'Open Plains' without a hint of cover...... This will be a harsh battle, Onii-sama."

Miyuki's words exemplified the thoughts running through everyone who came to cheer them on.

"No, it's far better than the valley or urban settings. We would never stop if we started grousing."

His words not only bewildered Miyuki, even his teammates — Leo and Mikihiko turned around in confusion, prompting Tatsuya to launch into another explanation.

"The Ichijou Family's 'Rupture' is a technique that transforms liquids into gas, using the expanding force to wreak havoc.

For members of the Ichijou Family, using water vapor to initiate explosive attacks is the simplest of tricks.

For Ichijou-kun, the valley arena is synonymous to preparing a gigantic keg of explosives for him. Likewise, an urban setting would be filled with water pipes.

On the other hand, the open plains have no fluids that can be turned into 'explosives'. Even the 'Prince' himself wouldn't be able to call up water from underground to create explosions.

Of course, the woodlands or rocky areas would be more preferable...... But we should be thankful that it wasn't the valley, which would be the bleakest condition for us."

While the Year 1 students all wore a "So that's how it is" expression, the upperclassmen still wore grim faces.

"......Still, you're still forced to fight on an open field with no cover against a Magician who specializes in bombardment, so this disadvantage remains."

"Shiba, do you have a plan?"

After Mayumi's question, Hattori also spoke up.

Hattori actively striking up a conversation with Tatsuya was an incredibly rare event.

Similarly, Tatsuya wasn't able to completely hide his shock at this turnout, hence his response was half a beat slow.

"If they insist on using their original tactics, honestly I don't see how we can turn that around...... However, Ichijou-kun seems to be particularly fixated on my presence. If I can get into close combat range, then I have a few options."

"Isn't close quarters combat forbidden?"

"I'm in the clear so long as I don't touch him. I have a few tricks up my sleeve."

At Kirihara's question, Tatsuya smiled without much confidence.

◊ ◊ ◊

The finals for the Newcomers Division Monolith Code.

While it could be said that the arrival of the players drew a huge clamor from the audience, it would be more in line with the truth to say that confused squabbling reigned supreme among the audience.

Exposed beneath a myriad of curious stares, Mikihiko adjusted his hood and pulled it down even tighter.

On the other side, Leo wasn't wearing a hood as he tried his hardest to duck his face and use the robe's collar to cover himself.

"Well...... So our getup is hilarious after all."

"The usage is just how I explained."

The abrupt answer was like the final nail on the coffin, clearly signifying "Resistance is futile".

"......Why us......"

Mikihiko bemoaned this fact to the only person not wearing the mantle and robe — Tatsuya.

"As the vanguard, there's no point in wearing anything that would obstruct physical movement."

Regardless, Mikihiko's objection was easily turned aside by combat practicality.

"That scoundrel...... She must be laughing herself silly now......"

Leo didn't clarify exactly "who" he was talking about, but for the two other people present, nothing else needed to be said.

"Ahahahahahah...... My, my sides are killing me~. What is that, WHAT is THAT! Ahahahahaha......"

Just as the three of them surmised, Erika was roaring in laughter in the stands.

"Erika-chan, please stop......"

After Mizuki tried several times to bashfully persuade her, Erika's laughter finally dropped to a level that was more normal.

"......Ah~, I'm dying. No wonder everyone's eyes are drawn to the things that Tatsuya-kun thinks up."

"......I think Erika's the one who's being watched right now."

Next to Erika, Mizuki shyly hunkered down.

"Sorry, sorry. I just couldn't help myself there. I promise to stop messing around now, so cheer up, OK Mizuki?"

"Seriously...... Please do!"

After she could feel the gazes (she didn't have the courage to visually verify this) around her stabbing towards her turn back to the arena, Mizuki finally raised her head.

"But, what exactly is that?"

Since there were no obstructions on the open plains, the audience could directly view the entire arena. Even so, the distance was still far enough that details were hard to make out, so everyone was watching the large screens for details on the players' expressions, just like in the other competitions.

Erika was watching the images on the main screen that depicted Mikihiko and Leo standing in First High's territory.

After watching for a few more seconds, she shook her head as if to say "might as well raise both arms now".

"Nope. I still can't tell what they're trying to do. Since this is Tatsuya-kun after all, I'm sure he's not just doing this for show."

"......Lots of 'spirits' are gathering on Yoshida-kun's robes......"

"Huh?"

An unexpected response answered her murmuring. Erika turned to one side and sucked in a breath as she saw Mizuki remove her glasses and an incredible light dancing in her eyes.

While a minority in the audience believed that Leo and Mikihiko's garb was out of date or from the wrong century, very few people laughed outright in derision. The thought that dominated the minds in the audience was what were the "robes" and "mantles" being used for.

Still, for their opponents, they couldn't just use the word "curiosity" to wave it off.

"Are they just doing this for show?"

Hearing their teammate's speculation, Masaki and Kichijouji both shook their heads.

"That guy knows George's background...... Is this his solution to 'Invisible Bullet'?"

"It's true that my magic doesn't have much in terms of penetrating power...... Still, it's not so simple that a mere piece of cloth can stand against it, so it's hard to believe that he would rely on such an amateurish countermeasure."

"Or this is done to make us think there is some strategy at work here?"

"That possibility is not altogether zero, yet......"

Masaki's words became vague.

"......I don't understand. Was he saving this all this time for this moment......"

Kichijouji bit his lip. It was precisely because he prided himself on his intellect that he was particularly frustrated.

"We advance recklessly, but forcing ourselves to contemplate something that cannot be discovered now is pointless. There is always some degree of risk when using force to win."

In order to cut through Kichijouji's befuddlement, Masaki spoke up in a forcible tone.

Despite this, Masaki himself wasn't immune to this perplexity.

What aroused curiosity from the audience was nothing short of a source of great wariness to the enemy.

The players and auxiliaries were oblivious to this, but there was another reason behind the ruckus.

The reason came from the observation deck near the board chairman's room.

A completely unforeseen visitor had arrived.

"Kudou-sensei! Why are you here?"

Elder Kudou, who usually watched the matches from the screens in the VIP lounge near the main headquarters, had personally come to the visitors' observation deck.

"Even I like to occasionally come here for a look."

Kudou Retsu nodded generously to the board members that all stood to welcome him and sat in the leather chair that was hastily prepared for him.

"Of course, it is our honor to host you here, but......"

But, why now? In face of this silent query, Elder Kudou frankly replied.

"It's nothing really. I just noticed a rather interesting young man."

The moment before the match begins was undoubtedly the time when a player was at their most nervous. No matter how confident they were or how great their odds were all things became questionable at this time. This was no playoff that was the best of a series, this was single elimination where everything came down to the line in one match, so it was only natural to be uneasy at being uncertain of their opponent's strength.

That being said, their nervousness vanished the moment the starting signal sounded.

Once the battle was initiated, there was no room for further doubt.

Once the signal was lit, both sides began bombarding one another.

They were using long range magic attacks.

The audience was overjoyed at this result; whereas, the supporters in First High's stands were shocked into silence.

There were approximately 600 meters between the two fields.

The distance was shorter than the woodlands or valley settings, but in terms of range for firearms, this was still a stretch for the effective firing range of assault weapons. This was the range for sniper rifles.

At the same time, both sides were firing at one another with CADs shaped like automatics as they steadily approached one another step by step.

Tatsuya was dual-wielding twin pistols just as he was during the preliminary and semifinal rounds.

On the other side, Masaki had swapped out the Generalized CAD he used during the semifinals for a Specialized CAD.

While the CAD in Tatsuya's right hand was responsible for intercepting enemy attacks, the CAD in his left was retaliating. Realizing this, Masaki abandoned his defense and concentrated on attacking.

The ensuing result was,

The originally disparate gulf in firepower widened even further.

Compared to Masaki's "shots" that possessed the power to decisively end the engagement, Tatsuya's "shots" could do nothing aside from trying to tie up his opponent.

However, his attacks were not telling. This level of Oscillation-Type Magic was too weak to rate actual defense, as a Magician's unconscious Data Fortification would protect themselves.

The number of attacks was also overwhelmingly inferior.

Despite having many tricks up his sleeve, Tatsuya was undoubtedly weaker in terms of pure technical skills. Yet, not only was he exposing himself to his opponent's attacks, he was accurately shooting down each of the incoming attacks at a distance that the naked eye could barely ascertain. Just this point alone was awe inspiring.

"Such courage!"

A nameless Year 3 male student quietly gasped.

"Is he really a Course 2 student?"

A female player asked one of her teammates.

The upperclassmen were expressing their surprise not because of the strength of his magic, but because he maintained his mental concentration despite suffering severe bombardment from his opponent.

Yet — Mayumi, Katsuto, Suzune, Azusa, Hattori...... Each of them wore grim faces.

Right now, both sides were still feeling each other out, but every step Tatsuya took forward put him more and more on the defensive and subsequently, he was retaliating less and less. This point was blatantly obvious to all of them.

Compared to the players and members of First High, Kichijouji felt an altogether different shock in Third High's territory.

Tatsuya was currently using Oscillation-Type Magic.

Yet, in the three matches leading up to this moment, Tatsuya was using Nonsystematic and Weight-Type Magic.

(He managed to alter the design of his Activation Sequence in a mere two hours......?)

Kichijouji shook his head to dispel the cobwebs.

No matter how skilled his CAD calibration skills were, the calibration process had no bearing on the match itself.

What determined the outcome was only how he chose to wield the result of his calibrations.

This was not the time to appreciate his calibration speed. That was the "perplexity" that may lead to an accident in battle—

"Proceed as we discussed, I'm heading out!"

"Understood, leave the rear to me!"

He hadn't even noticed his hubris towards the enemy team before his eyes. Kichijouji looped around Masaki's rear and charged towards First High's territory.

Since Kichijouji charged out of allied territory, the match had entered a new phase. Nonetheless, the audience's attention was largely still focused on Tatsuya and Masaki's ongoing struggle.

To be able to endlessly release powerful magic, Masaki's talent was truly worthy of praise.

Regardless, Tatsuya's "Gram Demolition" that unerringly struck down Masaki's magic was even more moving.

Few members of the audience were aware of high level Counter Magic like "Gram Demolition". "Gram Demolition" demanded an excessive psion count, so even researchers specializing in the field had few opportunities to catch a glimpse of this magic.

Even without knowledge on the subject, the large screen that displayed the psion movements clearly showed the scene of brilliant psion shells striking, shattering, and then erasing the Compression-Type Magic Sequences.

This was a glorious, dreamlike image that set one's heart aflame.

Magicians who could perceive the psions and the spectators who possessed latent magic talent had no need for the large screen and could only bow before the psions wildly dancing in a storm of magic before their eyes.

Unbound by reason or logic, they were held spellbound by this spectacular air show.

Presently, Tatsuya focused all his attention on shutting down each of Masaki's attacks.

Even so, he still took note of Kichijouji emerging from Third High's position.

Like a chain reaction — in reality this was a direct result of seeing Kichijouji's advance, Tatsuya's hitherto steady pace accelerated to a run.

Masaki didn't panic in the slightest at Tatsuya's change of pace and calmly launched Compression-Type Magic at Tatsuya.

His run failed to adopt any evasive maneuvers.

It's not like his opponent was using his eyes to aim, so that degree of evasion was meaningless.

As he ran forward, Tatsuya concentrated on the mass of energy formed to alter the Eidos in the air and sent a bullet made of psions — "Gram Demolition" straight into the mass, shattering Masaki's magic before it could materialize.

Nonetheless — with the distance between them drawing ever closer, aiming was more simplistic. While physical distance was not a direct factor, the closer the physical target was, the easier it became to perceive its proximity and existence.

Especially when aiming air-like objects that are not usually visible. The closer the target was, the easier it became to take aim.

Of course, in this situation, the only target at hand was Tatsuya himself.

Fifty meters from Masaki, Tatsuya ground to a halt and was unable to completely nullify Masaki's attacks.

The compressed air that Tatsuya failed to bring down came crashing towards Tatsuya.

Tatsuya relied on his five senses to detect their trajectory and deftly used his physical techniques to avoid them as he continued to advance towards Masaki.

Unable to advance straight forward, the dozens of yards between them became an insurmountable wall for Tatsuya.

"So, he's finally reached the point where he can't hold back any more."

Seeing Tatsuya forced into a corner, Yamanaka actually remarked happily.

"Please be serious, sensei. Even Tatsuya-kun can't rely on only his five senses to completely detect the early warning signs of magic invocation and Invisible Bullet. Given the current situation, we can still use a 'sixth sense' as an excuse in place of 'Eye of the Spirits'."

At Fujibayashi's vigorous defense, Yamanaka smiled devilishly.

"Really? That's true, while he can fool those third and fourth rate scrubs...... It's hard to imagine he could pull a fast one under the eyes of that gentleman."

Yamanaka's line of sight was resting on Elder Kudou, who was watching the match with abundant interest from his seat in the chairman's lounge.

Fujibayashi only spared him a quick glance before switching back to Tatsuya.

Kichijouji was looping around the fringe of the arena as he advanced towards First High's monolith. When he came within 100 meters of First High's territory, Leo barred his path.

Finding it odd that the defender was so far forward, Kichijouji fired off an "Invisible Bullet" as he ruminated on this.

No, more like he was about to fire.

"Wha?"

In front of him, a black wall obscured his gaze. Leo had removed his mantle and held it unfurled before him.

A metallic plate flashed towards Kichijouji's flank like a storm of blades.

Facing the flying blade from the Weaponized Integrated CAD, Kichijouji immediately activated Move-Type Magic and sprang backwards to avoid the blow.

On its heels, a powerful gust chased after him.

Kichijouji used Weight-Type Magic to reduce inertia his body was suffering and used the force of the wind to reduce the gust attack.

(How meddlesome!)

Kichijouji muttered in his mind and aimed the "Invisible Bullet" at Mikihiko.

He chose to first remove this irksome fire support.

However, the moment his gaze fell across the gray robes, he was suddenly unable to detect the target's proximity.

Like a heat wave disrupting the focal point of a camera, the gray figure became fuzzy and hard to grasp.

(Illusions!?)

They had taken advantage of the fact that "Invisible Bullet" required visual confirmation. The moment Kichijouji realized this, he also detected the blade of the "Mini Communicator" slashing downwards at his head. Unable to dodge, he could only close his eyes and await the impact.

"Gah!"

Yet, Leo was the one who cried out in pain as if all the air had been forcibly expelled from his lungs.

The blade Leo swung was sent off target and buried itself into the earth. Leo was flung aside by the blast and crumpled to the floor.

"Masaki!"

He was saved! Sparing the words of thanks, Kichijouji called out the name of his protector.

Kichijouji, who had completely fallen into the enemy's trap, was plucked out of danger by Masaki, who was still bombarding Tatsuya's position.

His fingers quickly danced across the screen of his CAD as Kichijouji brought up Weight-Type Magic.

The force of gravity abruptly intensified, sending Mikihiko "plummeting" downwards helplessly.

Kichijouji abandoned fixating on his favorite magic and poured on the magic to crush Mikihiko into the earth.

Completely suppressed, Mikihiko could only expel the crushed air out of his mouth.

Tatsuya did not idly watch this scene pass by.

The split second that Masaki diverted his attention to Kichijouji, Tatsuya immediately closed the gap to within 5 meters.

For someone with Tatsuya's physical skills, this was but a paltry display of his prowess.

Yet, his target still remained one step away.

Masaki's face clearly betrayed his agitation.

Rather than being a panic brought on by terror, the instincts of a soldier who had survived the battlefield told him he was in danger.

A continuous chain of sixteen compressed air bullets, far surpassing the limits laid down by the rules, came swarming towards Tatsuya.

The Counter Magic Gram Demolition was a technique that used compressed psions as bullets to forcibly eradicate Magic Sequences.

Due to its forceful nature, this was a highly inefficient technique.

Unknown to the common man, Magic Sequences also differed in strength.

The Magic Sequences forged by someone of Masaki's caliber could not be so easily disassembled, so overwhelming force was used to forcibly annihilate it, which required an outrageous amount of compressed psions. Even for Tatsuya, this was not an inconsiderable sum, though it was far beyond what an average Magician could produce even if they spent the entire day working at it.

Yet in this instant, he had to dispel 16 shots.

Even though Tatsuya instantly made the call that Gram Demolition wasn't going to make it in time, he resolutely refused to use "Decomposition". He stubbornly stuck to his orders to keep classified magic under wraps.

He hid the fact that he was capable of "decomposing" information structures through "Gram Dispersal" and met the attack with "Gram Demolition".

The ensuing result was a given.

After bringing down 14 of the shots, the last two hits struck home on Tatsuya's body.

Seeing Tatsuya begin to crumple towards his feet, Masaki spat out "Shit!" in deep regret.

While in a complete flight or fight mode, he had released magic that surpassed the rules for destructive power. He realized this point the moment he released his magic.

This was only a few seconds after the fact, so the panel of judges might not have noticed yet.

The red flag hadn't been raised yet, but he was profoundly aware that he was about to be disqualified for violating the rules.

That realization caused precious seconds to slip from Masaki's hands.

His mind was completely blank as he concluded that there was nothing he could do to avert that.

[Multiple rib fracture. Liver ruptured. Massive internal bleeding.]

[Combat level dropping below optimal conditions]

[Auto Restoration Ability \ Auto Activate]

[Magic Sequence \ Uploading]

[Core · Eidos · Data \ Retrieving from storage]

[Restoration \ Commence — Complete]

—This sequence was completed even before Tatsuya could even consciously realize this.

Subconscious signal processing vastly outstripped conscious signal processing in terms of speed.

By the time he realized he was collapsing, his flesh had already been restored.

Within easy grasp of his fingers, a pair of motionless legs could be seen.

Tatsuya had no clue why Masaki stood there frozen and completely defenseless.

Currently, that reason did not concern him.

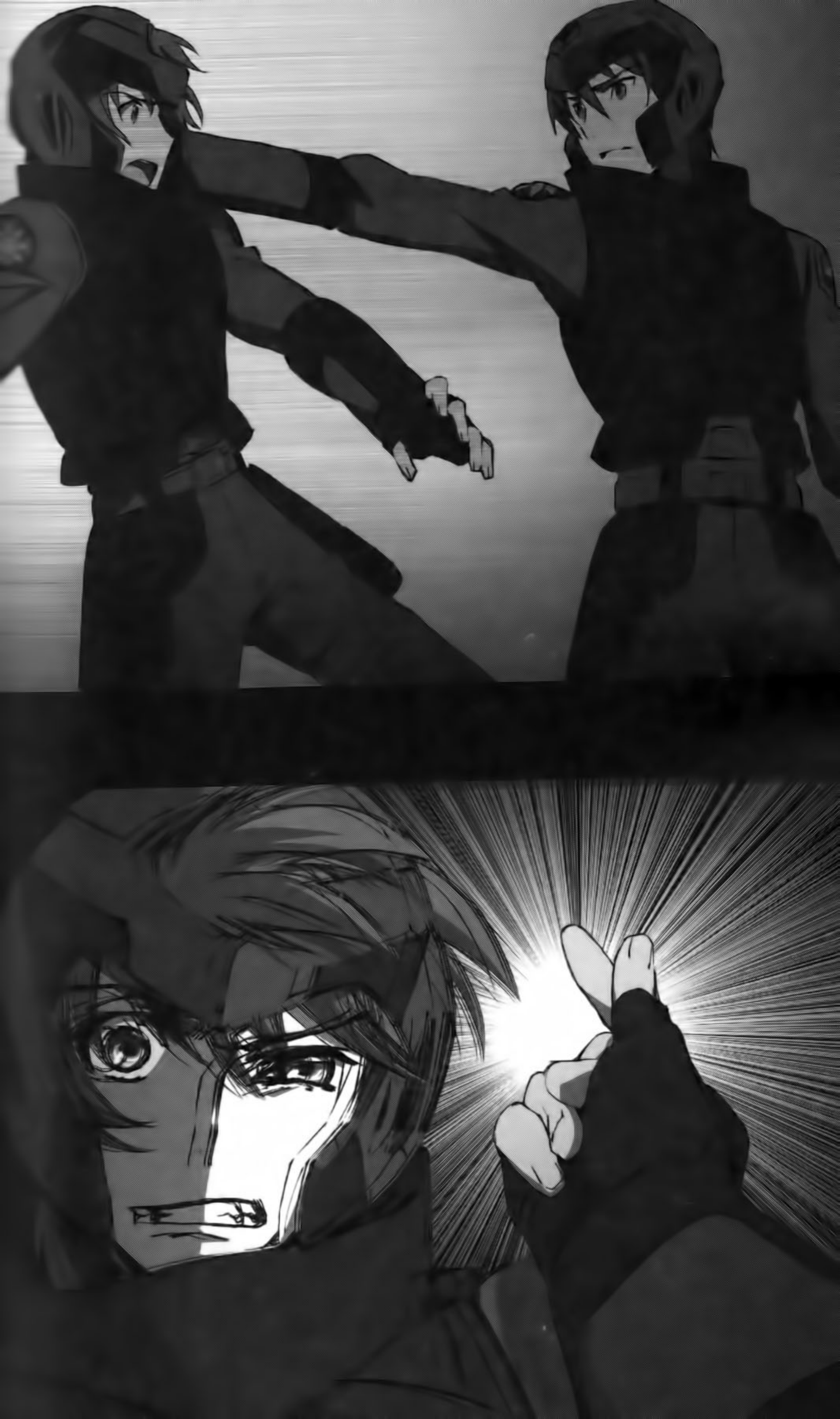
Before he even took the time to dwell on that subject, his body had already risen to its feet.

He took a step forward with his right foot and stretched his right arm past Masaki's face that was appalled with shock.

The right hand that stabbed forth was never intended to strike Masaki, and just as it passed Masaki's ear an explosion that was on the same level as a flash bang sprang from Tatsuya's right hand.

The roar rendered the observation deck utterly silent.

Even Kichijouji, who was still locked in combat, couldn't help but stop his actions and turn to look.



On Tatsuya's right hand, his thumb was pressed tightly against the tip of his index finger as he held his inter-crossed fingers before him.

Under the gaze of the all the players, judges, spectators, and supporters, Masaki sank to the floor while Tatsuya powerlessly fell to his knees.

"What? What the heck just happened?"

Her face and voice unified in complete panic, Mayumi inquired of her neighbors.

No one answered her.

Neither Suzune nor Azusa could answer Mayumi's question.

"......He snapped his fingers and then amplified the volume."

The answer came from Katsuto, who was directly across from Suzune.

"......That sounds about right. He simply amplified the sound wave. Such a cacophony would likely rupture his eardrums and the semicircular canals, thus incapacitating Ichijou-kun. Certainly well within the confines of the rules."

Suzune said after Katsuto.

"While the sound was amplified many decibels higher, the magic that was used earlier was solely from the Oscillation System. That's why Tatsuya-kun, who doesn't excel in activating magic at high speeds, could still accomplish this in such a swift manner."

"That was obvious right from the start! Anyone could tell that from seeing the right hand!"

However, Mayumi's mood seemed to blacken even more at these explanations.

"I am asking why was Tatsuya-kun able to rise after sustaining Ichijou-kun's attacks that should have crippled him!

Wasn't Tatsuya-kun taken out right there!?

His counter with 'Gram Demolition' was clearly not in time, right!?

He should have taken at least two hits!

So why has Tatsuya-kun taken damage that is beyond the maximum threshold for destruction and is still able to continue to fight!?"

"Saegusa, calm down!"

Mayumi took the news that Tatsuya might have sustained terrible injuries extremely poorly, as evidenced by her ashen face. Katsuto tried to calm her in a solemn voice.

"I saw the same scene, but the truth of the matter is that Shiba stood on his feet and moved in a manner that someone with grievous injuries is simply incapable of and defeated the enemy. Based on his current appearance, he appears to have suffered damage from the sound attack he released and not any other major injury."

"But......"

"Isn't Shiba an expert in antiquated martial arts? Rumor has it that the older styles contained physical arts that could strengthen the body and techniques that could mitigate blows directed towards the body. This is probably something similar to that."

"............"

Even though she wasn't entirely convinced of the veracity of Katsuto's words, Mayumi still recovered her calm.

"Our knowledge does not make up the entirety of the world. Magic is not the only 'miracle' out there.

In addition, the match isn't over yet."

"......You're absolutely correct. I apologize, Juumonji-kun. Sorry, Rin-chan."

As Mayumi was reconciling with Suzune, the battle entered a new phase.

"No matter when I see his Self-Restoration, the sight always impresses me to no end."

Fujibayashi turned a half skeptical look at Yamanaka, who was happily remarking on the situation — albeit with an appropriately lowered volume to account for the crowd around them.

"......Did you really see Self-Restoration actually activating? I, for one, didn't see the psion waves generated by spell activation."

"Neither did I. I doubt Kudou-sama noticed either. That being said, the speed of his Self-Restoration ability has long since surpassed the realms of human cognition speeds."

After reaching this point, Yamanaka finally noticed Fujibayashi glaring severely at him.

"Ah, no — I didn't see anything. Of course I didn't see Shiba Tatsuya-kun use some sort of theoretically impossible Self-Restoration ability. Seriously, his endurance is superhuman. How interesting!"

Yamanaka said lightly while indulging in delighted laughter. Fujibayashi stared at him in perplexity.

"Regardless, please don't call him in so you can run experiments on him. He's one of the only two people in this country, and rumored to be among the 50 or so precious assets with Strategic-Class abilities!"

"Somehow, I don't think he's such a weakling that he'd fall apart after one or two experiments."

"Whether he would fall apart is not the problem here!"

At this merciless scolding, Yamanaka quickly shrank his neck in.

"Fine, but no matter how we slice it...... He used that thing, just like Fujibayashi said he would."

"Indeed, Ichijou-kun is simply too tough an opponent with a low quality CAD. I think that even Flash Cast would be legitimate here."

"Single Systematic Flash Cast, eh. Oh well, at least he managed to keep our secrets."

The ones who wanted Flash Cast to remain a secret were the Yotsuba Family and not the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion. This ability was considered too unethical for even the military to adopt.

The Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion labeled Tatsuya's original magic as classified. Even in the direst straits, Tatsuya stuck to his guns and never used "Decomposition", only activating his Personal Restoration ability, which was something that no one could identify even if they saw it anyway. This way, Tatsuya only drew the attention of the masses. Otherwise, from the military's perspective, a prized military asset like Tatsuya should be constantly protected from the influence of foreign elements.

At the same time, that would also severely limit his personal freedom. If the situation developed in that direction, the military would be forced to consider opposing, no, flat out countermeasures against Tatsuya. While his words were irksome, Yamanaka actually heaved a sigh of relief at the current outcome.

"The CAD in his left hand is calibrated for Oscillation-Type Magic precisely to cover for this. He's just as prudent as always."

"If that's a high school student, there is something seriously wrong with this world. But, Flash Cast...... If he was an enemy, that sort of speed would be a terrifying threat."

Fujibayashi expressed her sincere acknowledgement of Yamanaka's words.

"Indeed...... That's practically brainwashing the brain into carving the images of the Activation Sequences into memory, then directly recalling the Activation Sequence from memory without the aid of a CAD. This ability completely bypasses the need for the CAD to spread and read the Activation Sequences......

In his situation, the calculation area in his consciousness has taken this to the next level. By being able to construct Magic Sequences from memory, he also avoids the time needed to construct Magic Sequences in real time...... This way, he has absolutely replaced the deficit in processing speed."

"More like made up for and then some. Do we even have someone in the troop that can beat the speed he just displayed? Even Yanagi, who shares the same systematic talent, is only barely able to match him."

"......True, I can't think of anyone else."

The two of them were no longer watching the match.

They were solely focused on Tatsuya, who was still kneeling on the ground.

Kichijouji was utterly panic stricken.

He could not believe the scene that lay before his eyes.

Masaki was stretched out on the ground.

Even though his opponent, Tatsuya, was also kneeling on the floor, light still dwelt within his eyes.

In other words......

(Masaki, lost......?)

This was an altogether unbelievable sight.

An implausibility that simply couldn't occur.

Originally, even if there was a minuscule chance the team could lose, the possibility that Masaki would fall was practically zero.

"Kichijouji, watch out!"

Kichijouji snapped out of it upon hearing his teammate calling out to him from their original position and activated "Lightning Rod" magic on reflex.

The grass became the focal point of the lightning attack and grounded out the electrical force.

Kichijouji finally realized that his opponent, who should have been crushed into the ground by Weight-Type Magic, was panting as the long robe whipped about him and glaring at him.

When the roar reached his ears, Mikihiko had no idea what had just happened.

He didn't have the leisure to personally witness his surroundings.

Still, when the pressure forcing him into the ground suddenly vanished, he quickly rolled to a safe distance and got to his feet and spontaneously adopted evasive maneuvers.

Then, he finally took a good look around him.

Leo had been knocked unconscious.

Tatsuya was on both knees. Even though he hadn't fallen, he didn't look like he could continue.

And next to him, Ichijou Masaki stretched out his full length on the ground.

(You did it, Tatsuya!)

Mikihiko once thought that Tatsuya could find a way through anything; yet on the other hand, he also felt: "Even Tatsuya is......" Fired up by the achievement before his eyes, Mikihiko leaped up with renewed vigor.

Not that Mikihiko's condition was any better.

Maybe, he was the worst off of the three.

A sharp, stabbing pain accompanied each laborious breath.

Even if the ribs weren't broken, he probably couldn't avoid minor fractures.

Due to the exorbitant amount of time under stress, he was a little light-headed right now.

His back was still in pain from being violently thrown to the ground. Mikihiko cursed the hardness of the earth despite the grass in the privacy of his mind.

However — he was not about to surrender.

In the worst case scenario, he still had to go one on two.

No, fear had no place in his heart, this was the savage truth of reality. Even so — defeat was not an option.

Tatsuya conquered the "Crimson Prince".

At the very least, he was going to show him that he could take down "Cardinal George" — it was this "obstinacy" that drove Mikihiko to stand on shaky legs.

He manipulated his CAD to release a lightning attack. At the same time, he channeled magic into the gray robe he wore — psions that had been digitized.

His image was consumed by the spirits of "shadow" hidden in his robe.

Shadows are not synonymous with darkness.

The outline of an object could be traced by its shadow.

As independent information bodies of "shadow," the spirits of shadow could disrupt the light and darkness that made up the silhouette in order to hamper an opponent's ability to identify and aim at the target.

The spell originally belonged to the Yoshida Family and him by extension, but Tatsuya was the one who provided the robe as supplement, rewrote the software of the CAD to its current peak condition, and suggested that he use this spell to distort his image.

It was all thanks to Tatsuya that he could come close to matching his previous self — though Erika believed that he had surpassed his past — in terms of magic.

For someone with his family background and history to be forced into such degrading tasks was the ultimate humiliation, and Tatsuya was the one who gave him the opportunity to prove his mettle on the battlefield.

Along the way to the finals, Tatsuya was also the integral cog that made their advancement possible.

At this rate, at the end of all things, all the laurels would fall on Tatsuya.

Upon realizing this, Mikihiko bit his lip and funneled new life into his wavering legs.

—I will not rely on Tatsuya for everything!

—My pride forbids me from doing so!

—No matter what it takes, I will have my vengeance!

—Kichijouji Shinkurou, how you have dragged me into the mud!

—Come, allow me to return the favor!

These were the proud, grandiose, and arrogant words that Mikihiko spoke to himself.

Tatsuya said it already.

He already told me.

It is not you, Mikihiko, who is lacking. It is the spell itself.

Then—

(Tatsuya, allow me to prove the truth of your words!)

He ignored the magic that shot around his body.

Shadow magic had displaced an illusion of himself several steps away for the enemy to shoot at.

Putting faith in his own abilities, Mikihiko typed a long string of commands into the large smart phone-shaped CAD hidden in the inside of his robe.

Next, he took his right hand off the CAD and slapped the earth next to his feet.

Most Generalized CADs use two numbers and a confirmation key for a total of three keys to begin an Activation Sequence.

Higher quality models, especially the high tech smartphone ones, had features that included auto complete and selection of high efficiency magics, so one key stroke was all that was necessary to activate magic.

Yet today, Mikihiko hit over 15 keystrokes.

That was 5 times as many moves as the usual Generalized CAD needs for magic invocation.

Nevertheless, Mikihiko used a fraction of the normal time to complete the steps for Ancient Magic.

Since the number of key strokes for each Activation Sequence was the same, Mikihiko had no need to hit any extra keys. He wasn't planning on combining five magics into one Magic Sequence, he was setting for the continuous activation of five magics.

This was a technique that unfolded in increments.

It wasn't a simple Magic Sequence that had five magics crammed inside. Inside the code for each magic, there lay instructions to begin constructing the next Magic Sequence.

Each magic would verify the surrounding conditions and pass that onto the next spell, which was a mandatory and critical step for all Magicians who wielded Spirit Magic.

This continuous chain of movements didn't require individual verification, but would process everything in a single, uninterrupted string.

That was the answer that Tatsuya gave Mikihiko.

The earth groaned beneath his hands.

Kichijouji was aware that the groaning was not caused by the Ancient Magic user striking the earth with his hands, but because he had activated Oscillation-Type Magic in the ground.

In spite of this, the "Magister"-like appearance and movements as well as their accompanying effect was sufficient to allow Kichijouji to mistakenly perceive that "the earth shook when the palm struck the ground".

Cracks formed in the earth beneath Mikihiko's hands and rushed towards the location where Kichijouji had lost his balance.

The ground was not physically tearing apart, but was being separated by the force exerted within. Theoretically, this was a concept he understood.

But for unknown reasons, his mental calculations seemed to have lost touch with reality.

Kichijouji used a combination of Weight-Type and Move-Type Magic and sought to escape through the air.

However, his feet were unable to leave the earth.

Grass was firmly wrapped around his ankles.

—He didn't know of any magic that could command the plants like animals.

His heart wavered at the idea of being attacked by unknown magic.

This was done by simply commanding the air currents that brushed over the earth's surface to create the image that the grass had wrapped around the target. Yet, Magicians who were only familiar with Systematic Magics would never believe that this was simply a "coincidental" — instead of actually changing the direction of the currents, all that was necessary was the perception of being "entangled" — brush of air.

The cracks in the earth arrived beneath his feet.

Kichijouji could almost feel the grass pulling him into the earth.

These were all illusions.

In order to escape from these illusions, Kichijouji gathered every ounce of Magic Power at his command into a leaping spell.

—And completely ignored the possibility that all this was unnecessary.

He had no need to tear through the cumbersome grass to jump to such a height.

Kichijouji was overcome with relief at escaping the mossy hell that had risen to his chin by springing into the sky. In this particular moment, his consciousness had completely overlooked Mikihiko's presence. The opponent whom he was locked in battle with currently did not exist within his attention.

This was the decisive opening.

Mikihiko had continuously activated 5 magics.

"Earthshaker", "Earth Splitter", "Wild Hair", "Ant Hell".

Those were the first four spells that Mikihiko used.

And for his last attack, "Thunder Child", this one was going to swat Kichijouji from the heavens as it came hurtling down from above.

"You bastard!"

Using his hands to hold him up, Mikihiko confirmed the kill shot. At this time, magic launched by the last member from Third High came flying towards him.

Dirt and dust piled atop one another as they came rolling forward, also known as Move-Type Magic "Land Tsunami".

Compared to the original conception of the magic, this was really a downscaled Land Tsunami. Maybe it was because the user wasn't well versed in this magic, or he toned down the firepower because of the rules.

Nonetheless, for Mikihiko, who had already sustained considerable damage from Kichijouji, this spell had sufficient power to finish him off.

He might be able to summon the spirits still burrowed in the earth to repel the oncoming dirt, Mikihiko thought — then swiftly gave up.

Alas, he didn't have much Magic Power left.

While it was called Spirit Magic, the "spirits" themselves didn't actually possess any power. Spirits were ultimately information bodies and nothing more than mediums used to influence the Eidos.

So, we still lost...... He thought as he watched the earth rush towards him. Suddenly, Mikihiko's vision was obscured by darkness.

With the heavy sound of something colliding into a metal wall, the earth returned to its original position.

Mikihiko raised his head towards the black flying object that blocked his view.

There, he found his teammate waving his hands and shouting at him.

The flying edge of the Weaponized Integrated CAD had traveled a long distance to take out Third High's last player.

"......Did we win?"

"......Yeah, we did."

Mayumi asked as if muttering to herself, to which Suzune replied in the same manner.

That became the signal.

No one knew who started cheering.

One person set off two others, then four people, eight people, the chain reaction continued onward.

Finally culminating in an explosion.

First High's disorderly cries seemed to merge together and sent the observation deck rocking.

This was a pure and innocent expression of emotion.

It was a sound that both serenaded the victors and bestowed the crushing blow of judgment towards the defeated.

However, this reckless celebration quickly tapered away.

Meanwhile, in the front row of First High's supporters.

The figure of a young lady could be seen as she clasped both hands to her mouth as she watched the arena with tears of joy trickling down her cheeks.

Seeing her brother stagger to his feet and wave at her, she was at a loss for words and could only gaze at him.

As if to support her, the applause gradually spread around her.

Shortly afterward, the applause spread from the stands for First High's supporters and spread across the entire stadium, regardless of whether they were friend or foe to form a clapping tide of praise.

—The entire stadium was enveloped in warm applause.

Even Tatsuya couldn't help but be embarrassed by the unexpected shower of applause.

Tatsuya took off his helmet and walked to the two others. Leo and Mikihiko were both waiting for him, neither one of them sparing a glance at the audience stands.

"......Speaking of which, you stole all the limelight. Were you waiting for that to happen?"

The first thing Tatsuya said as he approached was this accusation of being a glory hound. Yet, regardless of whether it was the recipient Leo, Mikihiko who heard this, or Tatsuya who spoke up, everyone knew this was only to hide their awkwardness.

"No way. I was really out of it for a while. That's the first time I've taken such a hit since taking a hit from a large motorcycle two years ago."

"What? You took a hit from a large motorcycle?"

Mikihiko asked with an "Are you joking?" expression, but Leo nodded his head earnestly.

"Yeah, that one hurt a lot. There was some kid behind me so I couldn't dodge, so I just decided to bite the bullet and pow! Just like that...... Still got hurt though, since I got away with three fractured ribs. Fortunately, this one wasn't as bad as last time."

"Uh...... Leo? Just in case, I just want to make sure that you used Fortifying Magic to defend against the compressed air pellets, right......?"

"Eh~, I'm sorry to say that all my concentration was focused on attacking...... So as you can see, I didn't have any defenses in place. Ah! How embarrassing."

Mikihiko's face was flooded with question marks. Bluntly speaking, he was openly gaping, but fortunately no one was on hand to laugh at his expense, since the large screen had switched to view the entire arena overhead and was unable to capture any details of the players' expressions.

"Then, you're telling me...... You just took Ichijou-kun's magic attacks?"

"I was defenseless, right? That's why it took me so long to get up. Hm? Mikihiko, you broke your lip. Are you OK?"

"Ah...... Yeah, I'm OK....... Sorta."

Mikihiko could only stand there stupefied at this disjointed conversation and unbelievable confession. However, Leo was in an excellent mood, so he didn't pay much attention to Mikihiko's bewilderment.

"Speaking of which, Tatsuya, you OK?"

"Hm? Sorry, could you repeat that?"

"I said, Tatsuya, you OK?"

"Ah...... Eardrums are ruptured on one side. Right now my ears aren't doing too well. Compared to that, Mikihiko, what's wrong with you? You look like you've seen a UFO."

Mikihiko was currently engaged in a mental struggle over "Was he the strange one, no, that's impossible".

"Uh, Tatsuya, you didn't hear...... our earlier conversation, did you?"

"I'm sorry. I'm reading lips right now to get a hint of what's going on. I did however catch the part about Leo getting hit by a large motorcycle."

"......So, do you have any questions for him?"

As if trying to end his mental struggle once and for all and prove that he was perfectly normal, Mikihiko asked Tatsuya with considerable trepidation, but......

"Questions? About what?"

Tatsuya's answer sent Mikihiko looking skyward in despair.

"Mikihiko, what's the matter? Don't be so melancholic. We won! We are the champions, the champions!"

"You're right......"

Mikihiko suddenly looked exhausted, which was perfectly natural considering Leo was perfectly at ease and Tatsuya seemed to mirror that sentiment.

Seeing those two, Mikihiko thought.

In the end, the final gasp was not decided by Magic Power or spells, but by physical endurance.

Upon seeing the two others finally give in to the undying applause and stand there side by side, shoulder to shoulder, as they waved back in response despite their embarrassment, Mikihiko was painfully aware that:
"I need to train a lot more......"

Chapter 11

The celebrations for both the Newcomers Division and overall victories happened at the same time.

The three replacements who took First Place and were directly responsible for the triumph in the Newcomers Division were all injured in the finals, so this wasn't exactly the time for reckless celebration. Even with that in mind, the real reason was even though overall victory was assured, preparations still needed to be made for tomorrow's Mirage Bat event, hence they didn't have time to really celebrate.

Thanks to First High's newcomers turning the table, the difference in score between First and Third High grew even further.

Currently, the difference was 140 points.

For tomorrow's Mirage Bat event, First Place earned 50 points, Second Place received 30 points, Third Place gets 20 points, and Fourth Place nabbed 10 points.

For tomorrow's preliminary round and the finals for Monolith Code, First Place obtained 100 points, Second Place received 60 points, with Third and Fourth Place each receiving 40 points.

Based on tomorrow's result, First High's overall victory might become a certainty before reaching the final day.

The players and technicians were overwhelmed with work trying to procure the essentials (such as the uniforms and CADs for the Monolith Code players), so any member with time on their hands was also thrown into the fray.

Tatsuya intentionally avoided using "Restoration" on his ruptured right eardrum and received the usual medical treatment from the infirmary. Afterwards, he used Self Restoration to fully repair the damage and covered it up with the medical patch issued to him. Currently, he was alone with Miyuki and busy preparing for tomorrow.

None of the other team members, especially the upperclassmen, knew that he had fully recovered, so they were still in the throes of worry. While Tatsuya felt slightly guilty about deceiving them, he had his reasons as well. In atonement, he chose to silently endure the discomfort caused by wearing the ear protector in the scorching heat of summer. —He was quite aware that such a trivial matter did not constitute as atonement.

Still, even though they were "overwhelmed with work", this could not compare to the sheer madness from the day before.

Scratch that, maybe it wasn't even close.

Yesterday evening, he had to fully equip two people from scratch — three, including himself — CADs included, which created a level of frantic industry rarely seen in this field.

Although Miyuki had switched from the Newcomers Division to the Official Division, she was originally slated for Mirage Bat anyway, so her preparations proceeded apace. Events outside of their control had cost them a day, but that wouldn't affect the outcome by much.

"Don't force yourself, Tatsuya-kun, take a break. You already pushed yourself too hard yesterday."

"Miyuki-chan, you too. If you always work so hard, we'll never stop incurring injuries."

Tatsuya expertly completed the CAD examination. Along with Miyuki, he was practically forcibly expelled by Mayumi and Suzune, drawing today's activities to a close.

◊ ◊ ◊

Elsewhere, at this time during the same night, another group of people were plagued by insomnia as they were backed into a corner.

"At this point, First High's victory is practically written on the wall..."

"Fuck that! Do you want to give up? Do you want to sit down and die?!"

"If First High wins like this, we're going to lose over a billion. In U.S. dollars!"

"We'd be better off dead in the face of that kind of loss! HQ was never interested in this plan because upon failure, the loss in capital would be enormous. We were the ones who forced this plan through. Now, if we're lucky we would be turned into 'Generators', and anyone unworthy would become 'Boosters' to slave away for the organization until the day we die."

The men sitting around the table turned fearful gazes on the four frozen men standing in the four corners of the room.

"Without this plan, we might not be able to meet our quotas... but I think we overreached ourselves."

"This isn't the time to say that! ...In that case, let's do it, by any means possible!"

"He's right! We already spent considerable energy forcing the favored candidates to lose their matches. By now, we shouldn't hesitate to adopt more brutal tactics. Even if our customers are suspicious, so long as we don't leave any evidence behind, those are only empty accusations at the end. Now, we go all the way or bust!"

"Send agents to the assistants. For tomorrow's Mirage Bat, force all of First High's players to withdraw — by any means possible!"

"They won't die if they're lucky. Otherwise, I guess they weren't lucky."

The men looked at one another with maniacal smiles on their faces, their thoughts in accord.

◊ ◊ ◊

The ninth day of the Nine Schools Competition. The pleasant weather that lasted until yesterday took a turn for the worse, with thick clouds that hinted of rain covering the skies. It was a dark and overcast day.

Still, there was no blinding sunlight with the dark clouds in the sky, creating perfect conditions for Mirage Bat. For the players, Miyuki included, this forecast was undoubtedly "excellent weather".

"While this is an ideal condition for Mirage Bat... Yet I somehow feel that this is the harbinger of conflict."

Hearing Tatsuya murmuring to himself as he watched the skies, Miyuki creased her brows.

"Is something else going to happen...?"

"Since their goal remains a mystery... No evidence of something afoot does not guarantee that nothing will occur. Regardless, Miyuki doesn't need to worry. No matter what happens, only you, I will protect to the absolute end."

Tatsuya's words had no superfluous meaning.

For Tatsuya, his sole purpose was to safeguard Miyuki.

To be brutally honest, in Tatsuya's mind, sacrificing the other players was nothing more than a method to the madness.

However — Tatsuya probably gave thanks that no one was around to overhear their conversation.

If a third party was present... If someone saw Tatsuya watching the sky and, out of his sight range, Miyuki drooping her head in embarrassment while wearing a thoroughly delighted smile as she drifted towards him, they might report the siblings for the crime of "homicide by headaches".

◊ ◊ ◊

Miyuki was set to appear in the second match.

Actually, appearing in the first match with the maximum amount of rest was the best case. But now that Tatsuya thought about it, not everything goes their way, so they should be thankful that she wasn't scheduled for the third match.

The two of them chose to observe the first match from the auxiliary observation deck on the side.

While there was a 45 minute break between the first and second matches, moving from the main audience stands to the competition arena was a waste of time.

The players from the other schools apparently thought the same, given the way they were congregated around one side of the arena.

"Kobayakawa-senpai looks pretty fired up!"

That was Miyuki's assessment of their senpai, who was one of the players waiting on one of the upraised circular pillars in the middle of the lake for the starting signal.

That was Tatsuya's opinion as well.

However, Mari once complained that Kobayakawa was an unstable individual. Now that he thought about it, since this might be the decisive match that clinched First High's overall victory, it was probably impossible to tell her to relax.

Still, the bottom line was that victory or defeat was entirely up to her, but there didn't seem to be any problems, Tatsuya thought.

Under the combined gaze of the audience, related personnel, and fellow teammates, the starting signal rang out.

The first match turned into flurry of activity to decide the standings, but Kobayakawa maintained a slim lead.

Breathless, Erika could finally let out a sigh of relief and turned to speak to her neighbor Mizuki — only to find her friend staring at the scene with widened eyes thoroughly unlike her.

"Mizuki... Is it OK for you to take off your glasses?"

Magicians who were oversensitive to pushion light wore special glasses to inhibit the effects of pushion light as well as to avoid becoming emotionally stimulated by active pushions. In the current situation, taking off her glasses in such a furious event surely brought incredible stress on her spirit.

"In truth... It's a little uncomfortable."

Erika noticed that Mizuki's hands that were holding her glasses on her thighs shook from time to time.

"But, I don't think that always evading the issue is the answer."

"...I don't think Mizuki is evading the issue at all."

Erika had heard Mizuki's reason for attending magic high school numerous times.

Of course, the predominant reason was to be able to take advantage of this rare talent. Specifically, she hoped to enroll in the magic universities as a Magic Artificer.

Yet at the same time, she also wished to learn how to control this pair of "eyes" that often saw simply too much. Within the limits set for Course 2 students, she wished to receive the fullest amount of training.

While still immature, but precisely because she saw this as her "strength", this certainly did not qualify as running away. And precisely because it wasn't fully developed yet, Erika believed that using supporting tools and equipment was the right approach.

Precisely because of this.

"Rome wasn't built in one day. Likewise, you won't fully control your abilities in one shot and, though I shouldn't be the one to say this, doing so usually ruins your body as well. Mizuki, this could cause irreparable damage!"

That's why she chose such a stern lecture.

"Yeah... But, if I avert my eyes at a time something that I must see is visible, I think that's also incorrect..."

In spite of this, Mizuki still kept her glasses on her lap.

"When Watanabe-senpai was injured, if I was watching carefully, I might have provided some assistance to Tatsuya-kun and the others."

"...So this time, you're keeping watch in case another incident occurs?"

"Exactly. You know...... I think Miyuki will be perfectly fine. That's because if something was wrong with Miyuki, there's no way that could escape Tatsuya-kun's eyes. However, he's simply unable to handle all the other players today. In addition, he was overworked yesterday. So if..."

"If the other players ran into trouble, Tatsuya-kun wouldn't just sit there twiddling his thumbs either. That's most likely the case... He looks cold on the outside, but he's a good guy on the inside."

"Tatsuya-kun's warmth comes from looking after his friends...!"

"Yes, yes, I got it!"

(If not towards his "friends", he would definitely be the sort to make the coldest, most objective decisions.)

Erika kept that thought to herself. She pressed both palms together in front of her and sought to comfort the slightly annoyed Mizuki.

Mikihiko, who was sitting on Mizuki's other side, interjected upon hearing their conversation.

"I understand Erika's concerns towards Shibata-san and share the same belief that Tatsuya has. Shibata-san's 'eyes' are undeniably the most reliable tool to prevent someone using Spiritual Magic to hinder the competition. Since we have a barrier erected around us to dampen the effects of pushion light, I don't think any residual after effects will linger."

Hearing the unnatural eagerness within Mikihiko's words (according to Erika), Erika revealed a mischievous smirk.

"Hm~...? So Miki will protect Mizuki now?

If something happens to Mizuki, Miki will take full responsibility now?

Of course, that's the type of responsibility men will take for women, right?"

"Wha, this isn't the time to talk about that!"

Beet red, Mikihiko's furious rebuttal wholly ignored his usual objection to his nickname.

Speaking of Mizuki, she was also blushing a deep red and seemed to be at a loss for words.

"...You truly are an evil woman!"

On the other hand, Erika utterly ignored the sighs and annoyed scoldings coming from the other side of her seat.

Between Leo, who was currently being ignored, and Erika, who was feigning ignorance, the usual lively conversation started. At this time, the bell for the second round started.

Both of them wore an "unsatisfied" expression and used their facial expressions to convey their meaning while shutting their mouths to avoid distracting the players and the other members of the audience.

Afterwards, shortly after the second round began, that incident happened.

Both Kobayakawa and another player leaped at the same time towards a green orb in the sky.

Unfortunately, the other player reached the target first.

Kobayakawa used magic to stop her leaping momentum.

Her body came to a stop in the air.

Next, she sought to use magic to return to her starting location, but found another player had already landed at that location.

Unruffled, she decided on the closest landing spot and switched the Magic Sequence to land there.

However, her body that was supposed to move in a diagonal pattern — fell directly downwards through gravity's influence.

Even the spectators in the audience could see Kobayakawa's expression falter as she began to fall.

Shock.

Panic.

Terror.

The magic that was supposed to support her failed to activate.

Magic had supported her life to this day, yet suddenly betrayed her at this critical moment. She forgot to even struggle as she plummeted towards the surface of the lake.

Even though it was the water's surface, this was still a 10 meter fall.

If the landing was poor, this might be fatal.

Nor did Kobayakawa appear to take any stance to prepare for landing.

Fortunately, this was an athletic competition with two or three layers of safeguards in place. There were emergency responses in place if a player suddenly lost control of their magic and began to fall.

The staff on hand immediately released Speed-Type Magic.

From the moment Kobayakawa started to fall until the staff used magic to catch her body, probably less than a second had elapsed.

Still, she was less than half way from the water's surface.

This was more than enough to completely crush her confidence.

With pitying eyes, Tatsuya watched them carry away his unconscious senpai on a stretcher.

The greatest reason why young men and women lost their ability to use magic was because of hazardous situations caused by magic failure and the subsequent distrust towards magic in general.

Magic is a power that deceives the world.

Magic itself exists outside the truth of the world, hence the deception.

Even so, if everyone could use their "eyes" to see magic like Tatsuya, then they could easily believe this deceptive yet truthful power.

Nevertheless, for most Magicians (especially the chicks and saplings), magic was an immutable, invisible existence. Even if they could see the psions, they couldn't see how magic was interacting with their world. In short, they were clueless beyond theoretical knowledge.

— When I'm using magic, is this really my own power —

Every Magician-in-training came across this question during their education. No, this suspicion. Once magic failed to materialize, resulting in danger that relied on magic to avert, this suspicion rapidly turned into belief.

— See, magic doesn't exist —

This belief.

Once this idea was implanted into a Magician, magic would forever be out of their reach.

Magic was such a fragile existence that balanced on the tips of the mental scales.

(...Kobayakawa-senpai is likely broken for life.)

As if to comfort the utterly pale Miyuki, Tatsuya cradled her shoulders into his chest as he murmured to himself.

When in gravity's grasp and at the moment of inception, Kobayakawa's expression was covered with terror.

It was someone else. Even if he made that distinction, realizing that someone had forever lost their precious abilities certainly left a bitter after taste.

As if pressing a burning brand to the gaping wound, his messaging terminal in the chest pocket started vibrating and arrested his melancholy.

Miyuki, who was pressed tightly against him, turned a shocked expression towards Tatsuya. He calmly removed the fold up device and pressed it to his ear.

"Tatsuya, it's me, Mikihiko. Got a moment?"

"...Ah, no problem."

Even though the lights clearly showed that the sound wave interference module on the device was working, Tatsuya still lowered his volume.

"Unfortunately, during the earlier incident, I was unable to detect any magic at work."

"Is that so..."

"Sorry for disappointing you..."

"Please don't worry on that account, I failed to notice anything either."

"However, Shibata-san has something she wants to say to you."

"Mizuki? You mean, her glasses were off?"

Tatsuya's tone contained a level of astonishment that wasn't feigned.

Yet, Mikihiko didn't immediately reply,

"Tatsuya-kun, this is Mizuki."

Because someone else had taken hold of the phone.

"Mizuki, did you see anything?"

Are you OK? Those words were stuck in Tatsuya's throat.

Still, Tatsuya believed that this would be trampling over Mizuki's good intentions.

As someone affiliated with magic, she made the conscious decision to use her "vision".

Then, inquiring about the results was what a member of the magic world like him should respond with, Tatsuya thought.

"Yes, well... On Kobayakawa-senpai's right arm... maybe near where she was wearing her CAD, I saw a light, no, more like a 'spirit' bursting apart."

"Really... You saw that. So, you said this 'spirit' burst apart?"

"Uh...... Yes, that's the feeling I got. Like a really old electronic scattering sparks everywhere, something like that......"

"I see. So that's it, I get it now... So that's how they did it."

Tatsuya got a muddled image of what snare their "enemies" laid for them.

"Uh, Tatsuya-kun...?"

Apparently, his nodding movement could be detected through his voice over the phone.

A somewhat hesitant, but very hopeful voice (from Mizuki) traveled across the other end of the line.

"Excellent find, Mizuki. This is an invaluable piece of information!"

"Thank you, you are very welcome!"

Before Mizuki could ask her burning questions, Tatsuya replied first. Afterwards, Mizuki's anxious voice came back over the line.

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Unfortunately, in the first match, First High was forced to withdraw in the middle.

Tatsuya departed First High's pavilion that was currently suffused in a gloomy aura and made his way to the CAD examination pavilion staffed by the board.

He left Miyuki in the player's resting area — even in the pavilion, it still counted as a "room".

Based on the modus operandi, it seemed highly unlikely that they would strike in two consecutive matches, and they hadn't directly assaulted the players themselves. On the other hand, players usually focused all their attention on the upcoming match rather than worrying about details like mechanical inspections and the sort. Tatsuya adopted a similar line of reasoning with his companions.

CAD examination was a procedure that had been repeated numerous times in the past few days and should be the area of least hassle or concern. However, his optimism died the moment he plugged the CAD into the examination device.

This behavior was completely impulsive.

The moment the board member took the CAD from his hands and connected it to the examination device and started operating the controls,

Instantly, he detected the anomaly, and by the time he realized this...

His hand had already dragged the man across the table and thrown him violently to the floor.

A pained shriek rang out.

Immediately afterward, an angry roar — to be precise, it was the guard who let out this angry roar — rapidly approached.

But, even hearing this sound was insufficient to halt his intentions.

A suffocating aura of killing intent stopped the footsteps in their tracks and draped the scene in silence.

This was the manifestation of the last remaining remnant of his "sincerity" (emotion-wise).

"...You've severely underestimated me!"

The painful groan was likely a biological reaction because of the increased force from the kneecap pressed down on his chest.

The board member that was thrown to the floor was so terrified of Tatsuya's demonic aura that his teeth weren't even chattering and could only lay there with spasms breaking out over his face.

"Did you seriously think that you could tamper with Miyuki's personal effects and not rouse my ire?"

Despite hearing this, any third party unaware of his family situation could not comprehend his meaning.

At the same time, even if that was the case, no one would fail to understand—

The sinister smile on his lips.

The board member who was on the receiving end of this violence had touched that which cannot be touched — the scales of the dragon.

Completely ignoring the crowd around him, Tatsuya coldly spoke to the man crumpled on the floor.

"What did you plant inside Miyuki's CAD during the examination? That's not a typical virus!"

The man's face shook even harder now. This level of terror and despair went beyond someone looking Death in the eye. This was the face of the condemned being read their sins in the depths of hell.

"So, this is how you tamper with the CAD software. Owing to the rules of the competition, no CAD can avoid coming through this bottleneck."

In the crowd of security personnel who arrived to subdue Tatsuya, the foremost one overheard Tatsuya's muttering and sucked in a breath. He turned his gaze on the man responsible for CAD examination who was currently subdued by Tatsuya. The officer's eyes gradually switched from watching a victim to gazing at a potential suspect.

"Still, you aren't the only one responsible for all the shenanigans during this competition, are you?"

Under Tatsuya's knees, tears trickled out of the corner of the man's eyes as he weakly shook his head.

"Oh? You choose silence?"

Tatsuya expressively formed the fingers of his right into a karate chop before the man's eyes.

The finger tips approached the man like the fangs of a snake.

Tatsuya's right hand slowly stalked towards the fallen man's throat.

Seeing this, everyone present was mesmerized by the sight and, for some reason, they were all thinking about the same thing.

They were visualizing the same event.

The young man's fingers would easily tear through this piteous sinner's skin, gouge out the throat, and pass merciless judgment amid a sea of blood...

"What is going on here?"

Just before this tragedy could play out to its inevitable conclusion, an elder's composed voice released everyone from their stasis.

There was no sense of intimidation or majesty; instead, the voice passed over them like a spring breeze as it swallowed the towering murderous intent and neutralized it.

"—Kudou-sama!"

His demons exorcised, Tatsuya reined in his demonic aura, retracted his hand and knees before rising to bow towards Elder Kudou.

"My terrible apologies. I have disturbed you with an unsightly display."

"You are — First High's Shiba-kun. Yesterday's match left an indelible impression. So, what's going on here?"

Feeling Tatsuya retract his fangs, someone sought to arrest the young man responsible for this chaos, but a colleague in the front ranks who overheard Tatsuya's words restrained him.

"Due to the illegal activities directed towards our school's CADs, I am currently interrogating the apprehended suspect."

"Is that so."

Anyone who had been held in place by his demonic aura and murderous intent knew this was a lie.

Interrogate wasn't going to cut it.

However, Elder Kudou chose not to pursue that issue and merely inclined his head at Tatsuya's words.

"This is the CAD that was tampered with?"

"Correct."

The old Magician once known as the "wiliest" removed the CAD from the examination device and held it before his eyes before nodding in agreement.

"...Indeed, an abnormality is present. I've seen this before. While I was still in the service, during the battles in the East China Seas, the Magicians in the Guangdong Army used this sort of Golden Electron Silkworms."

As he said this, he directed a chilling gaze towards the man on the ground.

This cold voice sent the man crawling backwards.

"Golden Electron Silkworms pass across connections to invade electronic devices. It's a SB magic that disables precision weaponry."

SB Magic was the name given to magic that used self-regulated immaterial existences, also known as "spirits", as a medium. Elder Kudou briefly recalled his experiences and slowly unmasked this magic.

"The silkworms don't rewrite the process itself. Instead, they interfere with the output signal and may even alter the signal. This delays the spell activation by hampering the electronic mechanism without triggering the OS or anti-virus programs. Prior to identifying the Golden Electron Silkworms, our forces suffered terribly under its effects... Were you aware of this?"

"No."

At Elder Kudou's inquiry, Tatsuya avoided any unnecessary movement and maintained an "at-ease" stance as he replied verbally.

"This is the first I've heard of the term Golden Electron Silkworms. However, I immediately detected a foreign element intruding on the system I designed."

"I see."

Hearing Tatsuya's words, Elder Kudou revealed a delighted smile.

Still, by the time he turned his gaze on the perpetrator, this smile had morphed into a predatory smile that a veteran Magician of a hundred battles turned on a hapless foe.

"Now, where did you come across the spell for Golden Electron Silkworms...?"

With a screech, the spy attempted to flee the scene, but was quickly brought down by the guards who originally came to arrest Tatsuya.

"Well, Shiba-kun. It's about time for you to return to the stadium. Just use the backup CADs for now. Since this kind of situation has occurred, there's no need for further examinations. Speaking of which, board chairman?"

At these sudden summons, one of the older gentlemen behind him — that being said, he was still a dozen years younger than Elder Kudou — hurriedly nodded his head.

"For such an unsavory individual to infiltrate the staff is a scandal of unprecedented proportions. Afterwards, I would like to hear your explanation."

The chairman looked ready to faint, but still managed to reply in the affirmative. Elder Kudou turned from his band of followers and once more turned a delighted gaze towards Tatsuya.

"Shiba Tatsuya-kun, I would like to speak with you sooner or later."

"Definitely, if the opportunity beckons—"

"Indeed, allow me to look forward to this 'opportunity'."

This was the first encounter between Tatsuya and Kudou Retsu.

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Upon returning to First High's pavilion, Tatsuya was acutely aware that the looks sent his way had developed minute, yet definitive, changes.

—Maybe, he should say they have "reverted to their original state".

The reason he said minute was because they were trying, but failed, to hide their subtle glances. They felt guilty about seeing him in a different light, yet could not suppress the wavering in their hearts.

Tatsuya was no fool.

His emotions were merely skewed in a certain direction, with one particular half becoming especially sensitive.

Hence, he was slow to accept good intentions.

Yet very adept at picking up hostility.

Currently, he was very accustomed to reading the glances thrown his way. It was the bewilderment, terror, and avoidance one experienced when encountering an unidentified outlier.

"Onii-sama..."

Among them, one young lady did not shun him and approached him with subdued voice and expression.

"Sorry, I made you worry."

That was the only gaze that plucked his heartstrings.

"How can that be! Wasn't Onii-sama enraged on my behalf?"

At the same time as she shook her head vigorously, her brushed hair parted slightly.

"That was fast. Have you heard the details?"

Tatsuya gently adjusted the loose strands and caressed his sister's head. Shyly, Miyuki dipped her head, but still answered her brother's question clearly.

"No. That's because, whenever Onii-sama is actually furious... It's always because of me..."

Her clear answer trailed off into a sob. Tatsuya used one hand to stroke his sister's face and gently raised her head.

"...Exactly. I will only anger for your sake.

But, Miyuki. It is perfectly natural for an older brother to be furious for a young sister.

In my heart, that is the last scrap of something 'perfectly natural'.

So, Miyuki, you don't have to be so sad."

Tatsuya released his right hand and pulled out a handkerchief, which he used to dab at the tear corners of his sister's eyes.

"Besides... Wouldn't it be a shame for your tears to ruin such a beautiful make up job? Today is an auspicious day when you will ascend to the stage."

"Don't say that... Seriously, Onii-sama. I'm not the only one competing today. This is called blatant favoritism!"

In spite of the wry smile, the brilliancy of Miyuki's smile was second to none.

At least, that's how Tatsuya saw it.

Seeing his sister's smile restored, Tatsuya was satisfied and at ease. His hands dropped from his sister's face to her shoulder as he directed them inside. When he lifted his head to look at the pavilion, he suddenly felt another subtle change in looks he was receiving. This time, the change was in a more interesting direction.

Hidden within the secret glances in their direction,

Was a lukewarm gaze that was both irritated but unable to take their eyes off of them.

"Ah, Tatsuya-kun."

Presently, as if the Student Council President spoke on behalf of all the students present, Mayumi used an especially cold voice and gaze to welcome Tatsuya.

"When I heard from the board that 'one of the students from your school abruptly assaulted someone', I was at wit's end trying to figure out what happened... So, apparently a certain sis-con brother flew into a rage when someone attempted to act against his beloved little sister!"

While this wasn't a very flattering way to describe the circumstances, Tatsuya got the distinct feeling of someone in the path of a tornado and feeling the cold wind nipping at him. Realizing that he was in a completely inferior situation, Tatsuya helplessly chose to make a tactical retreat.

Thus, he quickly retreated into the work room allotted for technicians.

This way, Tatsuya finally managed to avoid being ostracized within First High, though whether this result was brought about by his own will... Even he was not able to say.

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The day broke over a darkened sky and showed no signs of turning for the better by the time the second match started around 9:30 AM.

"It's a fine day today... Hopefully, this will continue into the evening."

"Might get sunny around the evening."

"Though starlight presents its own challenges... Oh well, still better than a rainy day."

The siblings' conversation seemed to assume that advancing beyond the preliminaries was a statement of fact. However, Azusa, who was sitting in a nearby chair, seemed completely "indifferent" with this.

Generally, the difference in strength between Year 1 and Year 2 students exceeded the difference between Year 2 and Year 3 students. This was because customized magic education officially began at the high school level.

Thus, if not present during the Newcomers Division, rarely do Year 1 students appear in the Official Division. Usually, players that were suddenly promoted to the Official Division from the Newcomers Division had a tough time getting through the preliminaries, not to mention placing in the standings.

That being said—

(That sort of common sense probably doesn't apply to Miyuki... And on top of that, there's Shiba-kun as well.)

Excluding her more timid nature, Azusa was undoubtedly one of the top tier Magicians (chicks) in her cohort. The fact that she was selected as one of the brass within First High despite her weaker personality was a testament to her skills.

Yet in Azusa's eyes, Miyuki possessed the power to challenge for First Place.

Just the sister alone was already a formidable opponent with superlative skills, now there was an older brother who was fully supporting her.

Even Mari, the favored champion, would be hard pressed to defeat her even in peak condition.

While Azusa was contemplating these other details, in reality, she was the technician responsible for the third match, which is why she was here so early to help make any final CAD adjustments and system diagnostics.

The Official Division's Monolith Code and Mirage Bat were the final two gender exclusive events in the Nine Schools Competition, so each school's personnel were busy preparing for the events.

First High chose to pair one player with one technician to handle these two events.

To be brutally honest, as a Technician, Tatsuya was also Azusa's opponent.

However — before the first shot was fired, regardless of who won or lost, Azusa's will to compete had completely evaporated.

The earlier incident.

The board sent word that Tatsuya assaulted some of the staff. Upon learning this, she was more "terrified" than shocked.

Rather than being surprised, somewhere in her heart she knew — "if it was him".

Even though they were nothing more than recent, casual acquaintances, Azusa believed that "he wasn't the type to act violently without cause". On the other hand, if he did have a reason, he wasn't the sort to hold back.

This readiness to resort to unbridled savagery chilled Azusa to the core.

A considerable proportion of magic usage fell within the purview of the military, both in terms of military strength and active deterrents. Azusa was perfectly clear on this point. But regardless of whether it was the military or public safety, this was still an institutionalized "violence". In order to activate this "violence", the responsibility was divvied between the decision maker, the one who gave the orders, the executors, and the supervisors.

Yet, he was willing to make the decision, execute, and bear the full responsibility.

Perhaps, he wouldn't even bat an eyelid if the man had to die — executed with his own hands.

She was absolutely terrified of that ice-cold heart forged of steel.

The shock came afterwards, when he shared the details behind his actions.

He came across illegal CAD modifications and apprehended the culprit on site.

The tear-stricken, tortured expression on Hirakawa, the Year 3 student who served as Kobayakawa's Technician, was deeply imprinted into Azusa's eyes. That sort of harrowing regret was easy to imagine and could resonate with anyone.

She hadn't noticed that the CAD was tampered with. Due to this, a player suffered a major accident, culminating in an exceptional peer possibly bidding farewell to her powers forever and being doomed to a broken life. In the face of that, she... If she was in Hirakawa's shoes, she might have fled the scene and cried herself to sleep in her hotel room, Azusa thought.

It was an undeniable fact that Tatsuya was a Course 2 student and, at the same time, a "dunce".

His technical scores hovered just above passing.

During the skill examinations after school commenced, roughly five students failed every year, so even if his grades were closer to "pretty terrible" instead of "fairly poor", there was nothing to be done.

Yet, the reality was — when excluding the "strength" based on artificial conditions like examinations and based solely on the Magician's ability to adapt fluidly to various situations, his assessment was completely inverted.

Regardless of whether it was development, analysis, calibration, or combat.

His strength went "beyond" First-Class.

Even if they didn't exclude his Magic Power and assessed him based on his ability to apply Magic, he was the true "valedictorian" worthy of standing at the top of the pyramid.

Then—

(Our "grades"... "Course 1 students", what of these? What's the point of differentiating between "Course 1 students" and "Course 2 students"?)

During the Nine Schools Competition, after watching Tatsuya at a close proximity, Azusa started seriously considering this question.

And remained bewildered.

That was the unease coming from her faltering values system, hitherto unchallenged and held to be truth, which had suddenly become vague and untrustworthy.

Azusa never held herself as an elitist who took pride in her "Bloom" status and derogatorily looked down at the Course 2 students as "Weeds".

At least, she wasn't conscious of it.

Despite this — her exceptional magical talent and her identity as a skilled magic high school student — she still took "pride" in these labels.

For Magicians groping their way through life, confidence in their own magical abilities was synonymous to the courage that sustained them throughout their journey to blaze a new path as Magicians. Even if Azusa wasn't consciously aware of this point, the fact remained that her confidence as a Magician undeniably supported her throughout her life.

This wasn't restricted to just magic. For youngsters, anyone would be greatly uneasy about such murky concepts like "tomorrow" or the "future" precisely because they lacked the "experience" or "track record", hence they relied on their "self-confidence" and "self-esteem".

For Azusa, those things ("self-confidence" or "self-esteem") originated from her "magic" and ultimately gave her status as a "talented student within the magic high schools". To be precise, her self-confidence and self-esteem were born out of her "magic grades".

That being said, both self-confidence and self-esteem could only wilt before the spectacle that was Tatsuya.

Her test scores as a Year 1 student were plainly superior, but regardless of whether as a combat Magician, Magic Artificer, or even Magic Researcher, she never got the inkling that she was better in any way. Even her own unique talents, which she privately felt could rival even Mayumi or Mari, paled in front of Tatsuya.

Still, Azusa felt that she didn't need to stress out over this feeling of self-abasement.

She was more than 90% sure that Tatsuya was "him".

—Against "him", feeling inadequate was only natural.

—Against "him", feeling diminished was ludicrous.

Azusa used this to convince herself.

(But everyone doesn't know yet...)

Precisely because no one knew, this feeling became more prominent,

Became more obvious.

Surely the other Year 1 students in his cohort felt the same.

As a Course 1 student who was outshone by a Course 2 student — what did their "grades" even signify?

"A-chan, it's best not to dwell on that for too long!"

Azusa was startled when someone suddenly greeted her from behind and swiftly turned around to find Mayumi smiling wryly at her.

"That thing, is spe·ci·al."

Despite referring to her underclassman as a "thing", her tone was quite warm.

"There will be some children who simply cannot accept this...... But as high school students, they must learn to accept things that they do not agree with. Even if it's true that Course 2 students cannot match Course 1 students in technical skills, it is also true that Tatsuya-kun has surpassed our level."

"Eh? But..."

Hearing these shocking words, Azusa was struck speechless.

True, Tatsuya's level was above her, Azusa thought. —Even if she was against "him", she was forced to admit she would have some regrets.

But Mayumi's level was also superb, and Azusa didn't think she would lose to Tatsuya in any way.

"It's not like I'm completely out of his league."

Maybe seeing through Azusa's bewilderment, Mayumi smiled wryly once more.

"From an aggregate magic perspective, I should have the edge. If it turned into a shootout, so long as I keep a wide berth, I can still do it."

After downplaying her words, Mayumi's expression eased somewhat.

"However, there are areas where I am unquestionably behind. For CAD related skills, even though I'm not far behind, I'm definitely no match for him. Unfortunately, he also holds all the cards in terms of magic knowledge."

Mayumi added carelessly, as if the upperclassmen's complete loss of face didn't concern her in the slightest.

"Everyone is proficient and lacking in different areas, so there's rarely someone who's superior in every single way. When I say Tatsuya's level is higher, I mean that his knowledge and skills in magic engineering are unrivaled."

Mayumi caught Azusa's eye in order to carefully examine Azusa's gaze.

"On the other hand, regardless of whether it is myself or A-chan, both of us tower over Tatsuya-kun in magic technical ability, so there's no reason to be so depressed. The contents of the magic skills examination each possess their purpose, just as the test scores are not representative of a person's value, test scores are only one part of a person's value."

Azusa wordlessly listened to Mayumi's words.

"Then again, heh..."

Whew, this time Mayumi actually let out a sigh.

"Those that fully believe in 'their own superiority' tend to be unwilling to accept that they cannot surpass someone in every way. They even forgot that the actual difference between Course 1 and 2 students originally arose because they needed to differentiate the grades for those who passed the entrance exam and who could receive instruction."

Somewhere, somehow, Azusa's eyes widened. Her mind had gone completely blank at Mayumi's unexpected words.

What did she mean forget? This was the first time she had ever heard that the difference between Course 1 and 2 students was caused by educational differences.

"In the end, it was still a uniform issue... In the beginning, it was simply because the number of students exceeded expectations and they couldn't change all the embroidery in time......"

"Eh, really?"

"Huh? You didn't know?"

Hearing the real story for the first time, Azusa received a wholly different shock than before and remained silent. Hearing Mayumi murmur, "Really, it appears that not many people know......", Azusa could only keep nodding.

"Did you know that First High used to accept 100 students each year? They had to accept more Magicians to follow international standards, so

First High increased their student body size. The government at the time must have wanted immediate results. Adding new students at the beginning of the next school year would have been fine, but in reality, they added more students in the middle of the term.

However, the school was unable to increase the number of educators in the middle of the term. So, their temporary solution was to teach the theoretical knowledge to the students who joined in the middle of the term, then begin technical instruction during the second year. This became the Course 2 student system.

However, once the Course 2 students enrolled, there was an error in the orders for school uniforms. Because of this, the Year 1 students who were temporarily set as Course 2 students had to suffer the indignity of wearing uniforms without the school emblems. This led to an unexpected misunderstanding...... The Course 2 student system was meant to be a placeholder until they could enter the next level. They were simply students who were enrolled after the original spots were already filled. Yet, they were gradually seen as replacements. Also, the plan that called for increased students ultimately failed to provide the adequate instructors, resulting in the misinterpreted 'replacement treatment' eventually becoming reality. This is the true face of the Course 2 student system.

The uniforms also suffered the same fate. In order to cover up the error, no one bothered to correct the issue after the original plan was scrapped. This is the truth behind the matter. In hindsight, creating two different uniforms was a complete waste...... Since everything is done automatically until the school emblems are affixed, it would be cheaper to have one uniform design even if the measurements differ."

Once she started, the words just wouldn't stop.

Azusa's sincere opinion after hearing Mayumi's explanation changed drastically.

The deep antagonism between "Blooms" and "Weeds" that had caused numerous instances of friction actually originated from such a trivial matter.

These words definitely must be kept from Miyuki, Azusa thought — the outcome was too terrifying to imagine.

"...Please, don't tell Miyuki-chan?"

Mayumi seemed to arrive at the same conclusion.

Azusa nodded in agreement without another word.

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Miyuki was wholly unaware of the fact that she was seen as a dangerous individual by two senpais on the Student Council. She was standing in the arena and happily waiting for Mirage Bat to begin.

That was because this was the first time in the Nine Schools Competition that her brother's time and energy were solely devoted to her.

Normally, by the time they returned home, their lives were restricted to each other.

There was limitless time for the two of them to be alone.

Yet in the dorms of the Nine Schools Competition, this was impossible.

Not that her unfulfilled desire was bursting from the seams (at least, that's what she thought), but after spending such a long time in a suppressed state, her joy was magnified in this instance.

In the box reserved for related personnel, her brother was watching her.

And watching only her.

Somehow, she felt that she could soar into the skies without the aid of magic.

She rendered the naked, lustful gazes directed towards her uniform that left none of her curves to imagination into oblivion. There was no reason to care because all stares other than Tatsuya's own were nothing more than trash. Turning the audience into beans — or even onions and carrots — was a widely known tactic that was rather useless to people who suffered from stage fright (anyone capable of turning people into beans wouldn't have stage fright in the first place). Yet for Miyuki, she honestly believed that all gazes other than from Tatsuya alone were utterly meaningless.

She knew very well that her brother admired well-taught and cultured individuals regardless of gender as she adopted a truly impeccable posture.

With such an incredibly beautiful young lady falling into a dancer's pose, many young men within the audience alternated sighs as their emotions ran rampant. At this rate, they were going to have to call for the stretchers before the match even began.

Possibly under the influence of the audience's warm reception, despite the sheer impossibility of this, the signal for the commencement of the match did go off a few seconds early.

Miyuki's frame lightly soared into the sky.

Every player for Mirage Bat prepared two uniforms.

One was a brightly colored uniform that could be seen beneath the brightest rays of the sun.

The other was a colorful uniform that glowed beneath the night sky.

The reason behind the designs was to prevent midair collisions between players and it became an unwritten rule based on previous experience.

The primary color that covered Miyuki was a deep magenta.

A tiny shade off and this would be a helplessly coarse color, but Miyuki wore this with an aura of nobility.

Neither did the cosmetics with UV protection take away from her elegance.

Her fair and graceful form was still developing, but when she extended her slim limbs, this painted a glorious vision of her beautifully curved bosom and slender waist, all of this combining to give off intimate charm of a blooming flower rather than a sheer animal desire.

No two ways about it, her beauty was breathtaking.

No one was going to second anyone anything as they all leaped towards the targets. Among them all, only one person could be worthy of the term "floating".

Miyuki captured everyone's gaze once more.

If this match was judged by the beauty of dance alone, she was unquestionably First Place.

Yet, as expected of the Official Division with its numerous aces, the Nine Schools Competition could not be underestimated.

"Someone is actually leading against Miyuki-chan..."

When the signal sounded to end the first round, Mizuki held her breath and seemed to expel out a series of "disbelieving" words.

"The player from Second High who is first place... Even if she isn't a BS Magician, but plainly, she has refined the 'Leaping' spell into a specialized magic spell..."

"Not just that. She also takes her trajectory into account and neatly obstructs Miyuki's path. Rather than calling her an expert in 'Leaping', she's more like an expert in 'Mirage Bat', right?"

Mikihiko and Erika both shared Mizuki's shock while they offered their own opinions.

"That's because the player from Second High was another favored candidate to take the crown alongside Watanabe-senpai..."

"Can't say anything about being noticed after that conspicuous display. Also, the pride of the Year 3 students is on the line."

Honoka and Shizuku, who were in the normal audience stands today, each expressed their agreement from different perspectives.

"However, this is not the end."

Leo's bright declaration seemed to blow the depressed air around them to the four corners of the earth.

In the next round, Miyuki managed to make up for lost ground and exited the second round in First Place.

However, her lead was slim. Miyuki still had strength within her, but her opponent appeared to be making adjustments for the third round as well.

Victory was still uncertain.

While it has been said that magic has become more constrained due to a limited number of combinations, for someone to be able to fight Miyuki to a standstill at the high school level surprised Tatsuya to no end.

"This country is so small yet so broad at the same time..."

Tatsuya muttered to himself in front of Miyuki, who was busy regulating her breathing.

Instead of watching his sister, he directed his gaze towards Second High's box.

...Just then, someone suddenly yanked his sleeve.

Looking down, he found Miyuki standing from her chair and watching him with eyes that shone with a brilliant glint.

"—Onii-sama, may I use that?"

Her eyes, her voice, and her slim fingers that clung to his sleeve sent the message, "I don't want to lose".

She wasn't just a beautiful, adorable "doll". Tatsuya delighted in seeing her expression that carried such a powerful will.

Her mouth naturally parted and her eyes narrowed slightly.

"...Of course. All is as you will."

He originally prepared that as the ace in the hole for the finals.

Still, Tatsuya abandoned his original game plan and nodded his assent.

"Eh? Miyuki's CAD has changed."

Seeing Miyuki standing on the field of the final round, Erika was the first to notice the change.

Until now, Miyuki held her usual smartphone-shaped CAD, yet now she wore a bracelet-shaped CAD on her right wrist.

"But, she looks like she's holding a CAD in her left hand too..."

Mikihiko also took a look. In their group of friends who were mystified by this turn of events, Honoka was the only one who nodded emphatically.

"Yes... Miyuki wanted to try that long ago..."

"That?"

Hearing Shizuku's question, Honoka replied back with a longing expression that was mixed with frustration.

"The secret weapon Tatsuya-kun prepared only for Miyuki. A secret weapon that Tatsuya-kun devised that only Miyuki can control. This will be a shocker... Definitely! Everyone present here, without a single exception!"

What exactly is it — before Shizuku could make her inquiry, the signal sounded for the start of the third round.

The bracelet on her right wrist was only the back up. The real one was the smartphone-shaped Specialized CAD held in her left hand.

The simplistic command interface only contained the on and off buttons. Once the starting signal went off, Miyuki swiftly tapped the on switch.

A tiny Activation Sequence started spreading out.

The sequence never halted nor paused as it repeatedly began processing automatically.

Following that, Miyuki's body started floating into the air.

The player from Second High was directly in her path.

Her trajectory would place her to Miyuki's lower left.

Owing to her opponent's faster rising speed, Miyuki would end up crashing into her if she continued forward.

Miyuki used her accelerated flying speed to avoid the collision.

The audience raised a clamor after Miyuki eliminated the orb and slightly turned in place as she became still in midair.

During her leap, she had applied additional Magic Power to accelerate again.

The gasps from the audience only reflected their cursory understanding of the basics of magic.

However, Miyuki paused briefly in the air then immediately proceeded towards the next target without landing. Once this scene was imprinted into their eyes, the cheers were shocked into silence.

Two, three, four...

The other players who had to continuously jump back and forth across the 10 meter height had no way of competing against Miyuki, who only had to move parallel to the earth.

After she had seized the fifth point, the audience's frozen vocal cords finally started to thaw.

"Flying-Type Magic...?"

Some unidentified individual murmured aloud.

Even the players could only stare in amazement as they gaped at the skies.

With the players not even making any jumping or landing sounds, this soft grumble reverberated throughout the silent arena.

With bat in hand, Miyuki's appearance took on that of an avenging angel of heaven, but never lost her grace and beauty.

"Taurus Silver's...?"

The whispering started a chain reaction,

"Bullshit, how can that be..."

"That was just released last month..."

And quickly rippled through the crowd.

"But that..."

"No doubt about it, that's Flying-Type Magic..."

Without a single exception, everyone's eyes were glued to the young lady dancing through the skies.

In the skies, a fairy was waltzing over the lake.

Her arms spread out to maintain her balance and her lovely legs swayed lightly to change her stance as if the spring breeze itself was her dancing partner.

Actually flying through the skies was nothing short of revolutionizing modern magic, and no one was more appropriate to perform this miraculous feat said to be "impossible" than this beautiful young lady before them... Surpassing age, gender, and even the enmity, all were mesmerized by the young girl dancing through the sky.

They were all touched by this magic that simply went beyond modern or ancient magic.

By the time the ending signal sounded, this spellbinding magic wasn't dispelled until the young lady landed before them.

—In Mirage Bat's preliminary round, first arena, second match, Miyuki stormed into the finals by a dominating lead.

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The audience finally recovered their wits when the players started leaving the arena.

The players did not depart in sequence.

At the end of the match, the players closest to the exit left first.

Miyuki, who landed in the center of the lake, was the third out of the four people to leave.

After extending a deep bow towards First High's supporters in the stands, Miyuki lightly leaped into the air and flew across the sky towards the exit like a figure skater gliding across the ice.

Her graceful motions prompted a thunderous applause from the audience.

In the stands, numerous individuals could be seen frantically typing away on their portable messaging terminals.

Some were overly excited to the point that they sent scattered spittle as they shouted into the microphone; others had to repeatedly shout the same words over and over into the phone, yet still wound up with a headache because of the speaker on the other line; still others furiously ran their fingers through their hair as if mad while their fingers danced across the keyboard; there were others who jotted down their thoughts on erasable boards... All sorts of people used a myriad ways to convey their amazing experience to others who were not present.

Among them, one strange, expressionless man was staring at the messages from the HMD. However, no one seemed to remark on his presence.

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"Number 17 has reported in. The target from the second match has passed the preliminary round."

"...It's the opponent who saw through Golden Electron Silkworms. This is the expected result... But things are looking grim."

"Not just that. The target also used Flying-Type Magic!"

"Bullshit, how can that be possible!?"

"If the target is exhausted then we lucked out... Was that too optimistic?"

"I don't think this is the time to quibble over the methods, right?"

"I agree. One hundred deaths or so would be enough. The competition would be forced to end prematurely."

"Once the competition ends, we would have to return the original bets. While there will be some loss, that's well within our limits."

"Won't our customers balk at this? Setting aside the guys from our line of work, those weapon merchants will be a hassle. Those guys maintain close relationships with various governments around the globe."

"It doesn't matter what excuse we give to the customers. Currently, rather than worrying about the merchants of death, we should be more concerned about the organization's purging."

"Exactly... Will it be OK just leaving this to Number 17?"

"People with only a modicum of ability are no match for a 'Generator'. Unfortunately, no weapons could be brought in, but Number 17 is a high speed model. Once the limiter is removed, that thing can easily kill anywhere between 100 and 200 people with its bare hands."

"So we are all in accord...? Then remove the limiter."

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Once the tide of enthusiasm ebbed, the man removed the CAD and slowly rose in a crowd that was slowly departing for other matches.

The exposed eyes give off an "emotionless" impression.

No, this wasn't a blank expression, wasn't this like he lacked emotions in the first place?

It was an utterly lifeless "expression".

Suddenly, the man's body started shaking.

In a flash, he activated personal Speed-Type Magic.

Before the Magicians around him could detect the charged magic aura, the man pounced towards the man who just passed by him.

His outstretched fingers plunged downwards like claws towards the unprotected back.

—Afterwards, the stage switched to the exterior of the observation deck without anyone being the wiser.

By the time that man, "Generator" Number 17, had grasped the situation, he was only three meters off the ground.

The first target he chose after receiving the kill order had managed to avoid his attack even though his back was facing him. Even if this was a full frontal assault, this reaction speed was not something mere human cognition could accomplish.

Through personal Speed-Type Magic, Magicians could surpass the physical movement limits of flesh.

Yet magical acceleration ultimately was only physical and not directly accelerating — biological reactions, signal relay for the nervous system, the brain's processing ability — the mental processing speed itself.

Human senses surpassed physical motion, so it was possible to mentally control physical movements that have been accelerated beyond normal limits. However, the reverse was not true. In other words, Magicians were still biological organisms with upper limits. While magical acceleration had no glass ceiling in terms of magic, there was still a finite amount that the brain could command.

In that case, his accelerated movements coupled with chemically enhanced mental processing abilities shouldn't be something that normal humans — even humans who could wield magic were ultimately mortal — should be able to handle.

Yet the reality was that his stabbing forearm was caught and used as a fulcrum to throw Number 17 into the air using his downward force as added momentum.

Just like he was doing a somersault over a horse, he went heads over heels in the air. During the instant he was upside down, a powerful force smashed Number 17 past the railing of the observation deck and sent him hurtling out of the arena.

This was Move-Type Magic that intentionally omitted the accelerated processes.

He was almost knocked unconscious by the blow and by the time he recovered his senses, he had nearly reached the end of the trajectory and was about to collide with the ground from a height of 20 meters.

Normally, this situation called for an individual to huddle into a ball or flail about in a panic as they helplessly plummeted to the earth, but this man was a "Generator".

He was a reconstructed individual — created through a combination of surgery and magically crafted medicinal herbs, hereby eradicating free will and emotions and completely controlling all thoughts and flushing all unnecessary thoughts that might obstruct magic activation.

A biological weapon forged to wield magic in the heat of battle.

A Magician re-purposed to be a tool for using magic, a "Generator".

Terror and panic held no meaning to tools.

Number 17 calmly — more like coldly applied Inertia Neutralization Magic.

Casting deceleration right now would be like hitting the emergency brakes, but injuries would be unavoidable. Compared to that, reducing inertia could help mitigate some of the damage caused by the severe shock upon contact. This was the result of almost instantaneous calculation.

The magical herb's effects not only adjusted personal consciousness, emotions and perception, they also improved physical mobility. By using the elasticity within his feet as well as the muscles within his thighs and arms, he completely absorbed the shock from his fall.

"You were able to make it in time even under those conditions. You do have a few tricks up your sleeve."

On all four limbs, Number 17 raised his face towards the source of the voice and found the man who had thrown him into the air.

"Who are you? ...No, never mind. Not like you can answer anyways."

Captain Yanagi of the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion let out a dismissive smile and peered down at Number 17, who was still crouched on the ground.

"Your physical abilities can't be from magic alone. Are you an augmented human?"

Seeing his opponent adopt a combat stance even after being flung over the railings from the height of a medium sized building, Yanagi's tone was laced with mockery and amazement alike.

"Yanagi-kun was the one who said there's no need to answer. Also, the other guy probably doesn't want to talk to a guy who also jumped from the same height but didn't need to use his hands to cushion himself, right?"

Number 17 whirled around like a four legged carnivore.

Having appeared sometime during this exchange, Captain Sanada Shigeru of the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion stood there as if to cut off his retreat.

Despite this, if he actually chose to flee, Number 17 could still probably accomplish this with ease.

In terms of sheer speed, "Generator" Number 17 surpassed the two men from the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion.

However, the order Number 17 received was "massacre the spectators". For a "Generator" with no emotions and thoughts, the only thing that determined his actions were orders from the organization.

In accordance with these orders, Number 17 once again pounced towards the "spectator" Yanagi.

Before Number 17 could touch him, Yanagi raised his right hand.

Even though Number 17 had the edge in speed, he chose to not avoid this hand.

Number 17 lowered his center of gravity and charged as if being led, sending his head crashing into Yanagi's palm.

Yanagi and Number 17 passed each other by a hair.

Number 17 was flung back to his starting position without even touching a hair on Yanagi's body.

"That was a rhetorical question. I was just talking to myself."

Yanagi nonchalantly replied to Sanada.

"Let's just leave it at that. However, that amazes me every time. Was that the application of 'Revolution' right there?"

By predicting an opponent's application of force and combining physical techniques with magic to lure, amplify, and flip. That's how Yanagi used his favored technique to send Number 17 flying.

"I've said this a lot of times, this isn't 'Revolution'. This is 'Return'. 'Revolution' is the spell, 'Return' relies on internal ki. There are also a few differences in practice. Originally, my approach was nothing more than an imitation anyways. A true 'Return' requires no magic."

"Well, that's starting to infringe on the meaning of our existence. Should I inform the major?"

"...Cut the chitchat, we need to take this guy down, lend me a hand!"

"Yeah... Then, let's have a go at it. Even though I want to say that, Fujibayashi-san already has this guy locked down with 'Thunder Needle'."

"...You two are on such good terms with one another!"

The sound of high heels tapping the ground accompanied Sanada's words as the figure of Lieutenant Fujibayashi Kyouko from the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion appeared. She was wearing a skintight military uniform reserved for supporting personnel that was wholly unsuited for combat. She was literally the ideal prey, the perfect point to break through the ring of hunters.

Yet, Number 17 could only quiver and shake as he shook uncontrollably, giving no sign that he was capable of further resistance.

That was because his entire body was peppered with numerous hair-like needles and it was through there that the electric current flowed through him.

Needless to say, it was Fujibayashi's magic that fired out the needles and released the electricity.

"Fujibayashi, your eyesight should be pretty good."

"Rather than her eyesight, I think it's a matter of sensitivity. Do you need me to recommend a good life counselor?"

"See, aren't you two simply birds of a feather?"

Separated by Number 17, Yanagi and Sanada glanced at one another.

They both frowned almost simultaneously.

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Completely unaware of the dangerous situation behind the scenes, Tatsuya leisurely returned to his hotel room and ate an early lunch.

After the match, while Miyuki was showering, the board requested to inspect the CAD with Flying-Type Magic installed upon it with nary a guilty look in his direction. For a brief instant, he toyed with the idea using Elder

Kudou's name to terrorize the poor fellow, but such mischievous behavior like pretending to know a higher authority to pick on the weak was a pastime unbecoming of him, so he discarded that idea and obediently handed over the CAD.

Other than that, he wasn't party to any strange circumstances.

While he was conscious of the vast amount of stares directed towards his sister and himself, so long as the vermin posed no direct threat, the best approach was to leave them alone.

After handing the CAD over, Tatsuya opted to return to his personal area.

Even if he knew about Sanada and Yanagi's surreptitious intervention to avoid a massacre, Tatsuya's actions likely wouldn't differ by much. To be blunt, even if dozens of foreign spectators were slain, Tatsuya probably couldn't care less.

To be precise, even if a senpai from the same school was sacrificed, his emotional reaction would not surpass that of slight "regret". Thus, it was hard to imagine he would choose to act.

Miyuki's slightly sorrowful expression expressed that which could not be said through her voice or attitude.

Needless to say, he was in the middle of it.

Long story short, Miyuki, who was always meticulously looking after him, was currently standing before Tatsuya.

"While always being neat and tidy is one of Onii-sama's merits, I still wish that you occasionally leave a small mess to bring out the value of looking after you."

Today, Miyuki's mood was buoyant. Currently, she was humming a light tune and wearing a delighted smile as she merrily wiped down the table with a cloth. This was the direct consequence of being unable to look after her brother for nearly a week.

"Miyuki, is there anything you would like me to do for you?"

There was no deeper meaning to this question after lunch. He was only doing so out of a sense of obligation.

"Something I want Onii-sama to do?"

Nevertheless, Miyuki's eyes widened as she fell into deep contemplation with a joyous expression on her face. Seeing this unexpectedly intense reaction, Tatsuya sensed he may have made a grave error.

Miyuki tapped her fingers against her chin and tilted her head this way and that in thought until, having thought of something, she blushed furiously as she peeked up at Tatsuya's face from the chair to his side.

"...Go ahead and tell me."

Even though there were traces of a wry smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, Tatsuya still gently urged her on. Filled with trepidation, Miyuki opened her mouth.

"You said earlier that I should take a nap after lunch until the finals..."

"Indeed, while not absolutely critical, you should sleep for a little bit if you can. Even if you cannot fall asleep, just lying there would be fine.

Don't tell me you don't want to take a nap? Giving your body time to rest is integral."

"Yes, of course I will listen to Onii-sama's instructions... But, that..."

"Hm?"

"Um... If possible, can you stay with me... Please..."

In the end, she was highly embarrassed.

Completely red, Miyuki's head drooped.

"...Miyuki is such a spoiled child."

"...Can't I? Miyuki just wants to be spoiled by Onii-sama!"

"...Of course. However, I will draw the line at singing a lullaby, OK?"

Miyuki slowly raised her eyes to Tatsuya while she used her hand to try and quell her violently beating heart.

Her pearly skin was a deep red from the gaps between her dark hair to the roots of her ears.

Despite their sibling relationship, they were still young adults in the spring of their lives, so using the same bed was totally out of the question.

Fortunately, even though the room had only one official occupant, this was originally a double room. The machinery that took up the majority of the space had been shifted to the competition grounds.

Tatsuya unfolded the bed from the wall and swiftly arranged it for Miyuki's use. This was almost entirely automatic, so there was no need to call room service. (Given that this was no normal hotel, the question remained whether they would show up even if summoned.)

Once Miyuki dove under the covers, Tatsuya pulled up a chair and sat down beside the bed.

Miyuki shyly smiled as she watched him. In return, Tatsuya also smiled as he gently caressed his sister's silken hair.

Less than a minute later, Miyuki was well on her way to the Garden of Hypnos.

Four hours passed after Miyuki fell asleep, but Tatsuya did not budge from the bedside. It was as if he was loyally fulfilling Miyuki's expectations for him to remain by her side, yet Tatsuya never felt this was a trial.

Miyuki was sound asleep, her sleeping face expressing her overwhelming relief. Upon realizing that this was an expression of the complete trust she had in him, his heart grew a little warmer along with his embarrassment.

Even if they were siblings, Tatsuya and Miyuki only started living together three years ago. In other words, they became bona fide siblings only three years ago. Before that fateful summer three years ago, even if they were living under the same roof, they practically never interacted with one another. Their current proximity was something strictly forbidden by their mother just as she denied any normal sibling interaction. Still, that may have been something decided by the Yotsuba Family.

Tatsuya had no intention of sprouting any complaints on that regard. It's not like that function remained within his mental landscape. However, lacking any childhood memories about being treated like a family member was still galling, so saying that he was displeased would be right on the mark.

The adolescent years were accompanied by impulsive anger, tears, falls, mistakes and other embarrassing memories if known by other family members. Yet for Tatsuya, who never enjoyed the luxury of these memories, Miyuki became a "beautiful girl one year younger than he was" by default. Since he was forced to see her in an impartial light from the onset, Tatsuya was well aware that she was a classy, beautiful young girl from the start.

In spite of this, the affection that sprouted forth from the depths of his heart only identified Miyuki as a young sister. The only true emotion that dwelt in the realm of his consciousness was the familial love he bore for his sister.

No memories, only affection. Occasionally, Tatsuya would ruminate that memory loss probably felt akin to this. Of course, he was also aware that he didn't qualify for that condition.

It was an unconditional affection unfettered by memories of any sort.

Precisely because of this, Tatsuya blindly, fiercely and desperately loved Miyuki. His other emotional impulses could not be expressed through fury or hatred. Only his love for Miyuki was truly spontaneous and absolute.

Tatsuya was wholly unaware of this. It wasn't that he forgot himself, but because this was the result of cold, hard calculations that his actions became unstoppable. Once he determined something was necessary, he wouldn't even stop to contemplate "Is this necessary". Even if he would weigh the cost and benefits, social norms wouldn't even break his stride.

Tatsuya picked up the smartphone placed on the coffee table. Since Miyuki fell asleep, he once more went over the coded message that Fujibayashi sent him. Within the message, there were details concerning the truth behind the interference during Mirage Bat as well as the mass murder attempt on the spectators after the end of the second match.

For Tatsuya, this was simply unforgivable. Those who plotted Miyuki's fall deserved to die a thousand times over.

Tatsuya stored the smartphone in his breast pocket, rose from his chair, and peered over the edge of the bed.

He softly caressed Miyuki's hair.

Miyuki placed her hand over Tatsuya's own.

"Miyuki?"

No response. She wasn't awake yet.

Miyuki turned on her side and naturally slid Tatsuya's hand onto her face.

Seeing that sleeping face flushed with happiness, Tatsuya also smiled.

Behind that smile, he made the conscious decision to defend this peaceful, sleeping face no matter what the cost.

This was not determination, but a conscious decision.

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By the time the finals rolled around, the morning weather had given way to a clear night sky.

The light of the hanging moon outshone the stars' brilliance.

For those who had to identify lit orbs from below, these were not ideal circumstances.

"How is your condition?"

"Flawless, Onii-sama. My energy is completely restored, so I would like to use Flying-Type Magic from the get go."

"As you wish. Fly to your heart's content!"

"Yes!"

Tatsuya gave her a thumb's up as he watched Miyuki bound towards the competition arena.

"Miyuki-chan's in a good mood!"

Azusa, who had entered the box as an auxiliary member, commented to Tatsuya as she watched Miyuki standing on one of the landing platforms in the lake.

Unfortunately, the player Azusa was responsible for had fallen short.

First High, Second High, Third High, Fifth High, Sixth High, and Ninth High each contributed one contestant to the finals.

No school had multiple players in the final round.

As the final women's competition, each school was ready to give it their all.

Excluding Mari, who was still in the hospital, every heavyweight in the women's division was present on stage.

Since Third High only advanced one player into the finals, so long as Miyuki placed within the top three, First High's overall victory was a foregone conclusion. Even the supporters were going all out.

"Pleasantly facing a competition is a good thing. Looks like Tatsuya-kun made doubly sure of that."

On the other side, Mayumi spoke up with a smile on her face. Her words shouldn't have any deeper meaning, but that smile seemed to signify something that she didn't want Tatsuya to know about.

"I hear that Miyuki-chan didn't use the 'Sleep Dock'. Did she get enough rest?"

At Suzune's innocuous question, Tatsuya fought to keep his poker face.

"Five hours should be enough."

"Really, must have been a deep sleep then. Did she sleep on a bed in the hotel?"

Tatsuya was speechless. One couldn't help but suspect that the speaker knew all along as she intentionally made this piercing query.

"Ah, it's starting!"

Fortunately, before the silence turned awkward, everyone's attention was drawn towards the arena.

At this point, he should seriously give thanks for Azusa's innocent personality.

The lightly colored uniforms were brilliantly lit up by the wavering reflections of light from the lake's surface.

Among them, Miyuki's choice of a uniform fashioned after the shade of sakura blossoms was particularly eye-catching, and not only because she stunned everyone by casting "Flying-Type Magic" in the preliminary round.

In the faltering light, the audience closely followed her with their eyes in fear that her figure would vanish into the shadows if they blinked.

Mirage Bat, also known as Fairy Dance.

The term "fairy" has been overused when applied to young ladies, but probably no one would claim that describing Miyuki as "fey-like" was too cliche.

The ruckus died down like the ebbing tide.

There was no need for the event personnel to wave their messages to signal the crowd to quiet.

Before everyone's breathless gaze, the finals for Mirage Bat commenced.

When the start signal went off, six young women flew into the sky together.

They did not leap off the ground. None of them bothered to look for a landing spot.

"Flying-Type Magic!? All the other schools!?"

"As expected of the Nine Schools Competition. They figured out the Activation Sequence for Flying-Type Magic within a mere six to seven hours."

On the heels of Azusa's surprised shriek, Tatsuya murmured words of admiration.

That being said, Tatsuya actually wasn't really astounded.

The board likely chose to leak the spell details to the other schools.

Probably as retaliation for Tatsuya's assertion that the board was guilty of illegal activities.

Since the CAD was stored there, he had taken this possibility into account.

"Seems like each school is following Taurus Silver's publicized details to the letter."

Suzune wrinkled her brows as she watched the sky.

"......How ludicrous. This isn't a technique that can be mastered the first time you activate this. Compared to player safety, victory seems to be more important......"

Mayumi said with a disgusted expression.

"That's no problem at all. If they used that technique directly, even if something went sideways, the 'safety device' should kick in."

Tatsuya's voice was quite relaxed as if he was saying: "Wait and see!"

Six young ladies danced in the air.

This was a Fairy Dance befitting its name.

The audience was deeply drawn to the lines crossing in the sky as they watched, mesmerized.

However, as the audience gradually calmed, they were shocked by an unexpected wrinkle in the match.

They were all flying through the night sky.

From a magic perspective, it was difficult to tell the difference in skill with Flying-Type Magic.

Yet, the only one scoring was the player from First High.

None of her opponents could keep up with her pace.

Speed, fluidity, grace.

She turned in air, drifted parallel to the ground, dove and rose.

Before that free and lovable dancing, the others alternated between trailing behind her or simply getting out of her way.

At some point, the dancing fairies had fallen into clearly defined roles, with one leading ballerina and five supporting dancers.

Miyuki was honestly caught off guard by her competitors using Flying-Type Magic.

Well, only a little.

The Flying-Type Magic that her brother developed could only reach its full potential if it was a spell that "anyone could use". On this point, Miyuki knew this better than anyone.

Still, something that anyone could use was inherently different from something that everyone could use in the same way.

Before the match, her brother had already warned her about the possibility of other schools also using Flying-Type Magic.

Her brother warned her with a smile on his lips.

At the time, that must have been because he had faith that no one surpassed her in terms of knowing the intricacies of this magic, Miyuki thought.

Buoyed by that faith, Miyuki danced through the skies at will.

Below her, the exhausted players fell one by one.

When the first player lost their balance and wavered in the sky, the audience shrieked in terror.

Yet, seeing the player gradually descend to the ground, the spectators breathed a sigh of relief. They just witnessed a crash landing in the preliminaries. Compared to the audience, the board was probably even more relieved.

Of course, this was because there was a "safety device" built into Flying-Type Magic.

When the influx of psions from the spell caster dipped below half, the "Variable" portion of the Activation Sequence automatically switched to a soft landing at 1/10th of gravity.

In First High's box, Tatsuya finally relaxed as he thought, "Thank goodness they didn't add any oddities to the program".

He couldn't believe that they were proving the safety values of Flying-Type Magic at the Nine Schools Competition with so many witnesses.

Might as well use this for this month's promotional purposes. Internally, Tatsuya reveled in an evil smile. Before his eyes, another player had dropped off the stage.

In the end, two people bowed out of the first round.

These two also withdrew from the match.

During the second round, another person withdrew.

There were only three individuals in the final round.

By this stage, so long as Miyuki didn't withdraw, First High's overall victory was guaranteed.

The most reliable tactic was to stand somewhere and simply not do anything.

Still, within First High's box, no one advised her to take the "reliable" route.

Currently, the score was a complete landslide.

Needless to say, it was in Miyuki's favor.

Though the overall victory was extremely important, no one in First High felt that they needed to sacrifice personal victories either.

Supported by faith and cheers, Miyuki danced through the sky in the final round.

Even if she couldn't see it, she could clearly feel her brother's protective eyes on her.

Miyuki understood that so long as that existed, her wings shall not fail.

Her unpinned wings spread out and blended together with the other lights.

Soon afterwards,

Two players sucked in ragged breaths as they knelt on the landing spots in the lake.

The sole actor left in the night sky, Miyuki continued to perform the Fairy Dance.

Before her outstretched hand, the last orb vanished into oblivion.

One beat of silence.

One frame of stillness.

The bell signaling the end of the match was drowned beneath a storm of applause.

Chapter 12

First High clinched the overall victory before the final day and decided to postpone the celebration until tomorrow. (Again? Anyone who said this was promptly ignored.)

Tomorrow, the finals for the Official Division's Monolith Code, one of the most popular draws of the Nine Schools Competition, would commence.

First High's representatives advanced to the finals after taking first in the preliminary round. Neither the players nor the auxiliaries had the time to attend the party.

However, since there was only one event remaining, it was also true that most of the members had plenty of time on their hands.

As Miyuki powerfully contributed to First High's overall victory with her performance in Mirage Bat, this time she was the center of the celebratory tea party held in the conference room.

Mayumi and Suzune hosted the event, with the female players making up the majority of those in attendance. That being said, it's not like there were no boys present. The uninjured Year 1 male students were congregated in a corner and holding their cups in a dejected manner. (The Year 2 and 3 male students were busy preparing for tomorrow's contest.)

Not only were Mikihiko and Leo present, Erika and Mizuki could be seen as well. Mayumi likely had another purpose in mind. (Erika tried her utmost to decline, but was forcibly conscripted by Miyuki.)

Yet, for some reason, there was no trace of Tatsuya.

"...So, he said not to wake him until morning?"

"Yes."

"That's no surprise."

"Since he's been quite active lately..."

As the Year 1 female students were in a group discussing a certain young man (they were Erika, Miyuki, Shizuku and Honoka), a Year 2 couple approached.

"Hm? Your brother went to bed already?"

It was Kanon and Isori.

"Indeed, he said he was quite exhausted."

"That... would be true. And he's injured as well."

Hearing Miyuki's answer, Isori nodded deeply. Once he raised his eyes and looked towards Miyuki, his eyes slightly widened.

"Hm? Isn't this Erika?"

"Kei-senpai, have you completed the calibrations for tomorrow?"

"No, taking a breather... Though it's more like Kanon dragged me out."

Isori could only smile wryly at these slightly mocking words. Next to him, Kanon wore a slightly irritated expression which was not completely caused by the earlier verbal exchange. There appeared to be something deeper as well.

"...Ah, Erika knows Isori-senpai?"

"Chalk it up to family relations."

Still, Erika didn't hold Kanon's mood against her, or more like intentionally pretended not to notice, as she turned to Miyuki.

"The Chiba Family is greatly indebted to the Isori Family."

"That's certainly not true!"

"No need to be shy, that's just how it is, objectively."

Seeing Isori frantically shake his head, Erika adopted a more teasing tone.

"My CAD was also developed by the Isori Family. Speaking of which, didn't Isori-senpai make it for me?"

Speaking of which, Erika pulled out her CAD that was shaped like a retractable police baton out of nowhere.

"Well, I guess... But only the 'Engraving' portion."

"You designed the Engraving spell yourself? That's incredible..."

"Kei is a genius!"

When Mizuki expressed her sincere admiration, Kanon was so proud that she momentarily forgot her displeasure. Isori could only shyly murmur once more: "That's definitely not true."

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By the time his absence had ceased to be a topic of conversation, Tatsuya slipped out of the hotel and advanced towards the parking garage reserved for officers on base. The other party was already there waiting for him.

"How rude, to leave a woman waiting!"

"My apologies."

This was hardly the time and place, but since he was in the wrong — less on the gender issue, more on his tardiness — Tatsuya frankly apologized when scolded.

Maybe she was disappointed that Tatsuya didn't offer any excuses, but Haruka didn't complain as she gestured for Tatsuya to get in the car she was leaning against.

After Tatsuya slid into the passenger seat, Haruka sat behind the wheel.

Both the interior and exterior of the vehicle remained darkened.

Haruka didn't bother to glance at the ignition and directly pulled out a smartphone from the storing space on the door.

Seeing this, Tatsuya also pulled out a terminal from his jacket pocket.

This was not the uniform for the auxiliaries, but a pitch black jacket with two bulges beneath the armpits, which Haruka pretended to be oblivious to.

"Just the map data is sufficient?"

"If you have the list of members, can you pass those to me as well?"

Haruka sighed. Tatsuya started sending data towards her terminal.

Seeing the display, Haruka's eyes widened in shock.

"Is that not enough?"

"No, that's quite enough!"

Haruka hid her expression and manipulated her own terminal.

Tatsuya skimmed over the data sent to him and said.

"Much obliged."

Just as Tatsuya slightly nodded and was about to press the button to open the car door,

"This is insurance, isn't it?"

Haruka asked stiffly.

"Indeed it is."

By the time this concise answer passed to Haruka's ears, Tatsuya's back was already facing her.

As he watched Haruka drive the electric double-door sports car through the main exit, Tatsuya removed the gauze covering his right ear and headed towards another car. Before he could tap on the window, the car door on the passenger side automatically opened. Inside, a woman near Haruka's age sat in the driver's seat.

"Who was that woman?"

"Agent from Public Safety."

Tatsuya easily revealed Haruka's identity and smirked at Fujibayashi.

"Though she insists that her day job is that of a life counselor."

Fujibayashi burst into laughter.

"So she's a part-time agent."

"I think she's fine on the ability end. Compared to seasoned veterans, rookies fresh out the door tend to be more reliable. They usually stick to confidentiality down to the letter, so I feel safer asking them for temp work. At any rate...... Accepting side jobs is slightly unethical, but money talks and merit walks — I guess that's just how it is."

Hearing Tatsuya nonchalantly speak such bleak words, Fujibayashi squinted at him — her eyes remained calm.

"Sometimes, why do I get the feeling that you should be 10 years older?"

"I feel that this has nothing to do with age and everything to do with experience. After all, I've accumulated varied experiences of all sorts here and there."

Emphasis placed on the term varied. Hearing this, Fujibayashi casually averted her gaze from Tatsuya.

Tatsuya didn't anticipate any particularly special response.

He removed the connection cable from the dashboard compartment and smoothly operated the touch screen on the passenger's seat and transferred the map data he obtained from Haruka into the navigation system.

"...I wonder if I can report this as overtime..."

"I think this certainly qualifies."

"The labor laws hardly apply to people like us!"

Despite elastic employment becoming mainstream, some laws still stubbornly survived the times. At being prompted to retread familiar territory, Fujibayashi didn't even bother to force a smile and merely shot Tatsuya a look and shifted the stick forward.

The commonly seen electric car employed by the masses shifted into silent run, a feature not detailed in the instruction manual, and slipped away in the darkness.

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Meanwhile, the one who ordered (?) Fujibayashi into the field was entertaining an unexpected guest.

"Please come in, sir."

The individual in question, who was not being welcomed by the soldiers on duty but by Kazama himself, was Elder Kudou.

Back when the old man was in the service, the rule that the "Ten Master Clans shall not assume high roles in government" had not been established yet.

That was because this rule was put into effect after experiencing a series of circumstances involving Kudou himself that ultimately led to the establishment of this rule.

When he retired, Elder Kudou held the rank of major general. Kazama's greeting was not out of respect for his status as an elder of the Ten Master Clans, but done in regards to his rank based on military protocol.

Kazama was a B-ranked Magician and also a member of the magical community that had the Ten Master Clans at the pinnacle. That being said, he identified himself as a Magician using the Ancient Magic "Ninjutsu", so he had a rather chilly relationship with the Ten Master Clans, who were the epitome of modern magic. (Naturally, his relationship with his subordinates within the battalion was another story altogether.)

Thus — assuming this was the right way to put it — Kazama's attitude might be respectful, but never surpassed the boundaries of being mere "formalities".

"You're dismissed."

"Yes, sir!"

Kazama ordered the soldiers on duty who brought the tea out of the room and redirected his gaze to Elder Kudou.

"So what may I do for you today? Fujibayashi is in the field right now and not present."

"I certainly don't believe that seeing my granddaughter requires going through her superiors... It's nothing really, I hear that it's rare for you to come from Tsuchiura, so I came to see you."

"I'm honored."

Seeing Kazama use the word honored but fail to express any respectful attitude, Kudou smiled wryly.

"You still dislike the Ten Master Clans that much."

"I've said that was a misunderstanding."

"And I've said there's no need to hide it. Magicians who wield Ancient Magic like you are 'humans' who have inherited the wisdom of the ages, unlike us, who are Magicians forged to be humanoid weapons. It's perfectly understandable for there to be some resentment."

Kazama's brows furrowed when he heard the word "human" being elongated on purpose.

"...Turning ourselves into weapons is exactly the same thing the ancient Magicians did to themselves. There's no great difference between you and I. If I do bear any resentment, that would be directed to humanity in general. I believe that this idea is something forced down the throats of children and the younger generation."

"Hm... So you took him in?"

Kudou calmly rebutted Kazama's fiery words.

"...Him, as in?"

"Shiba Tatsuya-kun. Isn't he the son of Miya whom you acquired from the Yotsuba Family three years ago?"

"........."

Instead of being struck speechless, Kazama's silence would be more aptly described as "highly irritated".

"It's hardly surprising that I would know about it, right? Three years ago, I was conveniently the chairman of the committee for the Ten Master Clans and currently remain a magic advisor to national defense. Also, though it was for a short period of time, both Maya and Miya were my students."

"Then you should also know this. The Yotsuba Family has not relinquished their hold on Tatsuya. He remains a Yotsuba guardian. Only under the conditions that his role as a guardian is not compromised is Shiba Tatsuya allowed to participate in military missions. Besides guardian responsibilities, the Yotsuba Clan is not allowed to assert their precedence. That is the agreement we have with the Yotsuba Family."

"Don't you feel that it's a waste?"

"What do you mean by a waste?"

Seeing Kudou lean forward and ask in a conspiring manner, Kazama feigned ignorance as he replied.

Elder Kudou did not fly into a rage and merely smirked.

"Yesterday's match was quite entertaining. While I hear that it was the only successful example, I didn't imagine that it would be that powerful."

Retired Major General Kudou watched Major Kazama's eyes like a hawk.

"Sometime in the future, he will become our country's invaluable military asset along with the scion of the Ichijou Family. Relegating such a superb individual to a mere private bodyguard, wouldn't you consider that to be a waste?"

"...Sir, do you wish to weaken the Yotsuba Family?"

"Since it's you, I'll be blunt."

At Kazama's question, Kudou maintained his thin smile and nodded.

"Through a series of checks and balances, we prevent the possibility of Magicians losing control of themselves. This is written within the design behind the Ten Master Clans."

Kazama's silence implied that, for him, Kudou's words were all known facts.

"However, at this current progression, the Yotsuba Family will become too powerful. At Shiba Tatsuya-kun and his sister's current growth rate, in the near future, Maya will still be around, Shiba Miyuki will become Yotsuba Miyuki with Shiba Tatsuya continuing as her guardian. In this scenario, the Yotsuba Family may become an existence that will eclipse the Ten Master Clans. Nay..."

Here, Elder Kudou paused and shook his head.

"Even in our current predicament, based on the fact that they possess unique abilities unmatched by other families and have a select but extremely powerful group of Magicians, the Yotsuba Family are already a special entity within the Ten Master Clans."

Hearing Kudou's words, Kazama wore a sarcastic smirk.

"That's precisely because they loyally obeyed your directive in creating 'Magicians who are humanoid weapons'. From a pure combat perspective, it is only natural that they are so special."

"And therein lies the difficulty.

Just as you say, Major Kazama.

They originally existed to develop new weapons, but they are no longer like that.

Something that only exists as a weapon will someday be excluded from the world of men."

"Sir!"

Kazama curtailed Elder Kudou's emphatic words.

"Sir, just as you know the details on my side, so too do I know a few things on your side. I know the real reason why you are so interested in Tatsuya's situation."

This time, it was Kudou's turn to fall silent.

"Thus, please allow me to make a suggestion and a correction."

"...Please do."

"I believe that there is no need to pity Tatsuya. He is not a docile lab rat to be pitied. Rather, he is someone who is reluctant to be viewed in that lens."

"That's your suggestion?"

"Indeed. Now for the correction... It's not the near future. Tatsuya is already an invaluable asset within the military. Saying this may seem like I'm promoting my own men, but in terms of military power, Tatsuya is on an entirely different level than Ichijou.

For point defense situations, Ichijou Masaki rivals an entire armored battallion's combat strength.

Yet, Tatsuya alone possesses the might of a strategic warhead.

His magic is restricted by several layers of limiters and is a bona fide strategic weapon.

And handing all the responsibility to him alone seems to be an overly heavy and cruel burden."

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In the car speeding towards the east, Tatsuya did not double over and sneeze repeatedly.

The electric car that Fujibayashi was driving — to be precise, Fujibayashi's car that was being directed by the navigational system, was coursing east along the central highway and reached Yokohama before midnight.

North of Yokohama Harbor in the east side of town, a sprawling Chinatown still bordered the high rise since the end of the 21st century (despite the multiple military conflicts between Japan and China). It was here that the car carrying the two of them came to a halt.

"...We know hostile agents are crawling around over here, yet I don't see any lock down or security checkpoints. What are the politicians thinking?"

Fujibayashi gazed at the streets in Chinatown and muttered in frustration. Next to her, Tatsuya merely shrugged.

"That's because on the surface, this area is one of the primary headquarters for politically oppressed Chinese who fled the country."

"That's a blatant lie!"

"That's why I said on the surface."

"Everything should have a limit. While we technically won, since no treaty was formally signed, from a legal standpoint, we are still on a war footing with the Great Asian Alliance and are only in a ceasefire right now. Everyone knows that this is a nest for spy activity, but no one wants to deal with it."

"Then again, maybe the number of 'people' is rising right now."

In contrast to Fujibayashi's nattering, Tatsuya replied in an easy manner.

Fujibayashi heard — or thought she did — something deeper in that answer and widened her eyes as she stared at Tatsuya.

"...Do you know something?"

"No, simply a wish, that's all."

As if signaling an end to the conversation, Tatsuya turned his back to her.

The current direction he was facing led him to the highest building in the city.

The cost for construction was staggering, but from a physical perspective, it was indeed the tallest skyscraper.

Until the middle of the century, this area was known as "Harbor View Park". Now, with three towering skyscrapers built in the area, one could see Yokohama Harbor and the sea from there.

The building's name was the "Yokohama Bay Tower", which the residents affectionately shortened to "Bay Tower". It included hotels, shopping centers, civilian offices, television stations and related facilities. The community for Magicians known as the "Japanese Magic Association" also set their eastern branch here rather than in Tokyo. (Main HQ was in Kyoto.)

Claiming that this tower was only for civilian use was a mere cover that even the citizens in the area could see through. Since this tower was in a perfect location to keep an eye on all the ships entering Tokyo Bay, this building also housed the offices for National Defense and the naval police disguised as civilian companies.

It was rumored that the Magic Association's eastern branch was in the building so that they could join the defense if an incident occurred. — Yet regardless of whether it was Tatsuya or Fujibayashi, both knew that this was no "rumor", but cold, hard "fact".

"Lieutenant, thank you."

"Looks like I really should apply for overtime."

The time was near midnight.

Fujibayashi placed a small information terminal on an emergency exit that was normally only accessible from the inside and was not covered by security personnel. Her other hand fiddled with the CAD.

The door mechanism originally didn't have a connection port or data jack, so Fujibayashi used a hacking program to gain access to the door by modifying the electric conductivity of the door.

Thanks to Fujibayashi's interference, the internal surveillance systems failed to detect their presence.

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On top of the highest floor in the Yokohama Grand Hotel — financed by backers out of Hong Kong and built in Chinatown in the first half of the century and had no correlation to the hotel before reconstruction — there was another floor that most customers were oblivious to where men were frantically preparing to move out of a room.

This room was originally reserved for the eastern branch of the Hong Kong-based criminal organization "No Head Dragon" and served as their operational HQ for eastern Japan.

The Hong Kong financier who ran this hotel had been compromised by No Head Dragon long ago, hence referring to this place as the operational HQ for criminal activity wasn't so far off the mark.

Even calling this moving would be a stretch, as the only things being shifted around were account books that weren't recorded into devices. Since these were highly classified account books that couldn't be recorded into systems with extensive safety parameters, they couldn't simply be handed off to minions to be packed. This was why several middle-aged (and approaching the twilight of their years) men were using silk handkerchiefs to mop away their sweat as they clumsily lugged around luggage with hands covered in jewels and rings. If an outsider was present, they would have found the scene to be exceedingly comical.

Of course, for the people in question, this was no laughing matter.

"Damn it... We've still got more!"

One of them stopped working and started cursing furiously.

"Speaking of which, I can't believe the Generator was taken out without inflicting any damage..."

"That was completely unexpected. We didn't think that Japanese special forces would shamelessly crawl out of the ground."

"Thus forcing us to try and evacuate in the middle of the night."

"They're so full of themselves after just winning one battle..."

Everyone present wished to express the words hidden in their heart to help vent their anxiety.

"One day, we will avenge ourselves upon the Japanese military, but first we must get rid of that kid."

"You're talking about the son of a bitch who ruined our entire plan?"

"Shiba Tatsuya right? Who is this guy?"

"Well... We don't know all the details. We could only find his name, address, school, and appearance. Forget family situation, we couldn't even get a list of family members. Only thing we know about his parents is that they are employed, all others remain in the dark. Likewise, we have no personal data beyond normal every day trivialities."

"The hell? This country counts as one of the countries with extensive personal databases on the international stage. Even looking at the civilian databases should yield at least some data, isn't this extremely odd?"

"Maybe we should see this as instead of classifying personal data, anything related to 'Shiba Tatsuya' has been systematically erased. I can't think of any other possibility."

The high-ranking members at the No Head Dragon eastern Japanese branch peered at their compatriot who spoke up and wordlessly glanced at one another.

"...Maybe he's not an ordinary high school student...?"

"If they wanted to systematically alter every personal database at the civilian level, this would require exceptional clearance at the highest level. Otherwise, they need the influence to intervene at the highest level of government."

"Seriously, who is it...?"

They stopped packing their luggage. Suddenly, they heard muffled screams.

In the corners of the room, four men could be seen.

They were the Generators lent to the eastern Japanese branch to serve as personal defenses.

In order to protect against foreign attack, they provided four different types of magic defenses. The Generator responsible for Data Fortification on the walls was precisely the source of these screams.

The reason was blatantly obvious.

The south facing wall had a gaping hole in it.

This was not caused by a collision, incision, or even a crack in the wall. The only remnants were the steel bars and structure hanging loosely with some puffs of yellow dust and settling cement.

The screams were caused by the destruction of Data Fortification and the subsequent feedback to the caster.

Still, the painful sounds only lasted for a few seconds.

The brass swiftly noticed the cause of the screams.

No Head Dragon was not simply a criminal organization, they were a criminal organization that abused magic.

In order to rise to the upper echelon, an individual must fulfill the condition of being a Magician.

They had to manipulate and identify magic.

Hence they were able to comprehend what unfolded before their eyes.

The Eidos surrounding the Generator who let out those piteous screams — this was a Magician's natural defense that unconsciously spread out to automatically protect oneself with Data Fortification — had been stripped away.

No, the impression was more like the armor was being evaporated.

In the next instant, the Generator's whole body was suffused by static-like contour and started fading.

At this time, the space the Generator's body used to occupy burst into a small flame.

Before the sprinklers could come alive, the small flame intermixed with orange, blue, and purple swiftly disappeared.

What fell to the rug was simply ashes.

The Generator's entire body disappeared and this was all that remained.

The brass was so terrified that they forgot to scream.

They peered at one another with horrified expressions.

All of a sudden, the telephone rang.

The sound came from the hidden land line that only the brass had access to.

One of them picked up the phone with extreme trepidation.

There was no image. Only the sound came across the display monitor.

"Hello, everyone from 'No Head Dragon's' eastern Japanese branch!"

The voice that came across the speaker was that of a young man — a teenager.

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Tatsuya and Fujibayashi ascended to the roof of the northern building of the Yokohama Bay Tower.

Here, along with the broadcasting antenna for the television station, there was also a wireless communication device.

Fujibayashi connected her terminal to the wireless communication device and rapidly tapped the screen.

"...OK, we're in. I've rerouted every wireless communication through here."

"As expected of the 'Electron Sorceress'. This point remains immune to imitation regardless of what I try."

"Thanks. I would be in serious trouble if someone could imitate me so easily."

Fujibayashi adopted a superficial smile that obviously didn't come from the heart.

"Have we already cut the line?"

"Captain Sanada already has that end covered."

Tatsuya pulled out the speaker attached to the information terminal with his left hand. After punching in the number Fujibayashi passed to him, he pressed the last key to enable voice communication.

He removed a pair of riding goggles from his jacket pocket.

Next, he pulled out a long-barreled CAD from his left shoulder holster.

This was a Specialized CAD shaped like an automatic pistol that was modeled after the Silver Series Long-models.

He stood before the protective railing and slightly raised his right hand.

The "muzzle" of the CAD was aimed at the Yokohama Grand Hotel far off near the bottom of the hill.

"...So that is a 'Generator'?"

"Yes, definitely. This is the first time we've captured one, but its characteristics perfectly match the intelligence report."

There was a solid kilometer from the top of the Yokohama Bay Tower to the Grand Hotel's roof.

Tatsuya adopted a shooting posture with a pistol-shaped CAD, so of course there wasn't a scope attached.

Even so, Fujibayashi never asked: "Can you see it?"

That was because she understood perfectly that, of course Tatsuya could see it.

Fujibayashi used an altogether different method of observation than Tatsuya, but even she was perfectly clear on who the Magicians and who the Generators in the room were.

"Magic tools that have been stripped of their sense of self. So this is the end that awaits all Magicians developed as humanoid weapons..."

"........."

"...I spoke too much, I apologize."

Feeling Fujibayashi's cold and disapproving gaze, Tatsuya hastily made amends and apologized.

Not all Magicians wished to be used as weapons, so his comment was indeed out of line.

Despite his apology, Tatsuya did not deny that he did resonate with the feeling somewhat.

There are indeed similarities between the way he and the Generators conducted their lives, Tatsuya thought.

Precisely because of this, within the remnants of the emotions left to him, the dominant emotion he felt was disgust.

They were a harmful, unpleasant existence.

Tatsuya never hesitated when destroying such a "device".

Silver Horn Custom, "Trident".

This was Tatsuya's favored instrument, that which brought out the finest of his magic. Tatsuya squeezed the Trident's trigger.

His original magic, the military secret "Decomposition" activated.

This spell broke the wall's basic components into powder.

By creating a physical hole in the wall that served as medium, he opened a hole in the "sealed" concept that protected the room from the effect of external magic.

Tatsuya's "view" of the interior had never been clearer.

When the activated magic was forcibly destroyed, the Generator shook from the blow.

Under normal circumstances, the Magician wouldn't suffer from the feedback even if the magic was destroyed.

This was likely a by-product of their inability to consciously terminate or halt magic by themselves.

He coldly surveyed the scene while his attacks — killing intent did not falter.

He noticed that one of the Generators released Wide Area Interference to protect the five members of the brass while the three others adopted Wide Area Interference to defend themselves.

He squeezed the Trident's trigger.

He set the "Wide Area Interference" from the Generator injured by the wall's collapse, the "outer shell of the Eidos", and "flesh" as the variables and plugged them into the Magic Sequence.

The processes for all three magics were completed in a split second with no time lag in between.

The first process decomposed the target's protective Wide Area Interference.

The second process decomposed the target's Data Fortification used to protect the body.

The third process decomposed the flesh down to the atomic level.

The decomposition was so complete that it was no longer recognizable as a biological entity and left no traces that this was a living being. Proteins were broken down into hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, nitrogen, and sulfur; the bones were rendered down to phosphorus, oxygen, and calcium; everything including blood, the nervous system, stored nutrients, even waste was decomposed down to the molecules and ions.

The lighter elements, with hydrogen at their head, escaped through the hole in the outer wall to the outside.

The flammable elements interacted with oxygen and burst into flames.

This scene was so surreal that it seemed like the human body spontaneously ignited.

Yet, the reality was that it had vanished rather than being consumed by the flames.

He had incorporated three consecutive Decomposition magics into one Magic Sequence and completely annihilated a Magician's flesh and body along with its naturally occurring magic protect barrier.

"Trident... Seriously, this must be what they call having your hair stand on end..."

This was the Specialized CAD specifically customized to activate three consecutive magics.

Within the Magic Encyclopedia, the term "Trident" was allocated to another magic.

However, within the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion, "Trident" referred to this merciless triple Decomposition magic as well as the CAD that optimized the process.

Tatsuya didn't hold Fujibayashi's trepidation or words that slipped out of her mouth against her and merely keyed the waiting information terminal and linked to voice communication.

Once they invaded the wireless communication device, the authentication system in the dedicated line lost all meaning.

"Hello, everyone from 'No Head Dragon's' eastern Japanese branch!"

Tatsuya spoke in an unnaturally cheery voice.

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The executive who picked up the phone failed to hide his befuddlement as he glanced at his peers.

This was a line reserved for executive use only, as well as a direct line to the main HQ. Only a branch chief or executives from the main HQ would know of this line, as ordinary members were unable to access this line. There weren't any teenage executives in No Head Dragon. Heck, there weren't even twenty year old executives in the organization.

"...Who are you?"

The voice didn't contain an interrogator's edge. Was this because he was quaking on the inside after watching a human body disintegrate into the aether?

"Much obliged for your work at Fuji."

The voice belonged to a teenage youth, but the tone was unmistakably adult.

"Allow me to return the favor."

When these words fell, the Wide Area Interference protecting the brass disappeared without a trace.

Not only the man who was holding the phone, but everyone still in possession of their wits beside the magic devices glanced towards one corner on reflex.

Before their eyes, a dimly lit flame ignited and swiftly vanished.

The sprinklers reacted to the multiple heat sources and inundated the area with high pressured spray.

The Generator that should be standing there had vanished without a trace.

"Where? Number 14, where did that come from?"

One of the executives stammered his words in reverse order.

Magicians are able to detect what magic was being used and where the attack came from based on the effects of phenomenon rewriting. Normally, there would be no way that they could fail to detect where such a powerful magic that could reduce a human body down to the atomic level came from when the target was so close to them.

Even if they couldn't accurately pinpoint the distance, they should at least be able to locate which direction the caster was in — yet this executive had completely panicked and was unable to do anything.

Compared to those who knew no fear — Generators had already lost their ability to falter, so they remained stolid in the face of their comrade's destruction.

Number 14's slow, plodding movement pointed towards the broken hole in the wall.

Across the street was the highest point on this street.

Another executive quickly snatched up a sniper rifle.

After raising the optical lens to his eye, he raised the magnification.

On the rooftop of the Yokohama Bay Tower, a youth was partially visible beneath the illuminating moonlight.

He raised the magnification to the max.

Even though he couldn't see the youth's features because of the riding goggles in the way, he could see the exposed lips smirk at him.

Seeing that twisted smirk, the man immediately screamed and fell to the floor.

His eye had been slashed by the shattered lens from the scope.

Still, the men didn't have the leisure time to worry about their moaning comrade who clutched at his eye.

"Number 14, Number 16, kill him!"

More than one voice ordered the Generators to retaliate.

However—

"Unable to comply."

"Not within range."

Machines cannot accomplish the impossible.

They were designed to wield magic stably under any condition. With this in mind, Generators didn't possess the function to use their full potential and surpass their limits.

"Don't you dare talk back to me! Attack!"

At Number 14 and Number 16 simultaneously answering in the negative without any inflection in their voice, the executive on the ground clutching his eye spat back furiously.

The response came through the phone.

"Did you really believe I would give you the chance?"

Number 14 and Number 16 were both consumed by static.

Both of them followed their comrade to hell.

"Stop issuing orders to your tools. Why not take up the sword yourself?"

Before the words traveled over the phone, a slightly mocking laughter could be heard.

Nevertheless, the men didn't seem to have the strength to rouse themselves to a fury.

That was a distance at which the naked eye couldn't even make out if someone was there.

No one present had the ability to use magic against someone who was both unidentifiable and out of range.

One man sprinted for the land line.

The others frantically brought up the wireless phones within their terminals.

Yet, the land line only bleeped back a disconnected signal,

Nor were the wireless phones working either.

"Don't bother. Right now I'm the only one you can speak with."

The same voice traveled along the original phone.

"How is this possible? Even the wireless signal... How did he..."

"All I did was converge the electronic waves. As to how I did this, there's no need for you to know."

They understood perfectly well the meaning behind his words.

Still, all those words did was solidify their sense of dread.

"Now, let's cut to the chase."

With this diabolical declaration, the man clutching one eye was surrounded with static.

The man's face twisted in utter despair.

His face remained twisted — as he turned into ashes.

Since the sprinklers had already inundated the room thrice with water, there was no longer any spontaneous combustion.

The men watched with frozen expressions their comrade who was denied even a funeral pyre.

One man desperately made for the exit.

Static swarmed around from behind him as his outline came apart and he vanished.

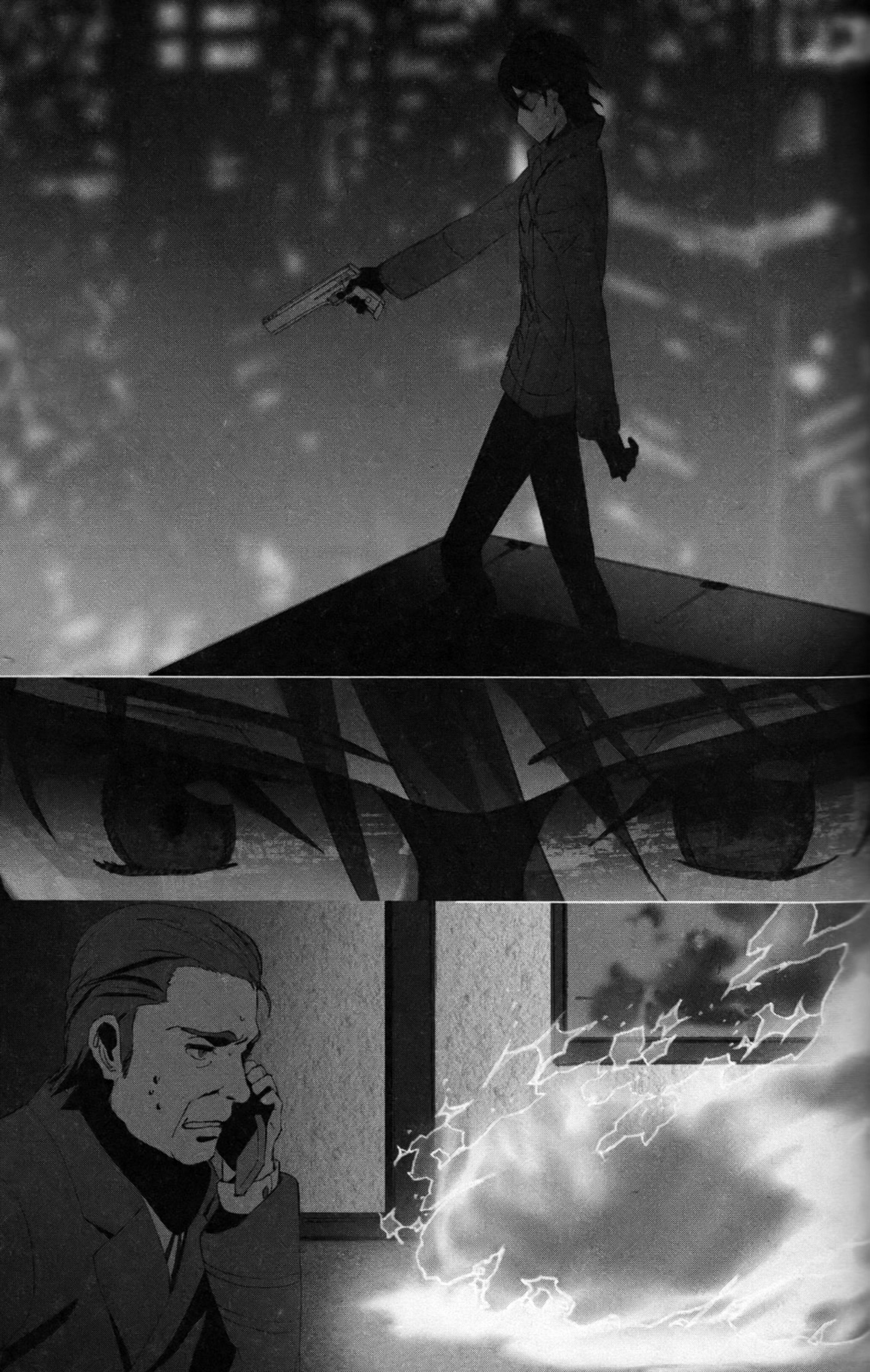
The last three remaining members of the No Head Dragon's eastern Japanese branch finally realized that their lives were held in the palm of a demon.

They couldn't help but arrive at this epiphany.

"Wait... Please wait a second!"

The man who served as the chief of the eastern Japanese branch seized the phone and shouted into the speaker.

"For what?"



He hadn't actually thought his words through.

He didn't believe his opponent was going to let him go.

No one who could eradicate men like mere numbers possessed a merciful disposition.

Still, contrary to expectations, a response came down the line.

"We, we swear to never interfere with the Nine Schools Competition again!"

"The Nine Schools Competition ends tomorrow."

"Not just the Nine Schools Competition! We will leave the country tomorrow! We will never again step foot into this country!"

"Even if you leave, others will still come back, right?"

"No Head Dragon will abandon Japan completely! Not just eastern Japan, but western Japan as well!"

"Do you have the power to make such a promise, Douglas Huang?"

The moment the opposing side called out his name, the man's heart almost stopped from the blow. Even so, Huang desperately kept speaking.

"I am the boss's confidant! The boss can't simply ignore my words!"

"In what way?"

"I once saved the boss's life! You owe the man who saved you a favor, that is our custom!"

"So you plan to use that 'favor' to bargain for your life."

Two looks shot towards Huang.

They contained the hatred and killing intent reserved for traitors.

However, Huang didn't have the time to worry about that.

"Didn't you plan to use that favor to win back your life from your boss?"

"No! The boss wouldn't abandon me even if I didn't do that!"

"So you claim you have that much influence?"

"Indeed!"

"By what do you make this claim?"

"That..."

"No Head Dragon — the headless dragon. That name does not originate from your own organization, but was applied to you by other organizations because your leader never appears before the subordinates. Even those that require personal punishment are first rendered unconscious before being taken to a private room. Quite the thorough process indeed."

Huang was consumed by a fear that was altogether different from the terror that came from death or being disintegrated.

He knew too much about his situation.

Whose tail did he tread on this time.

"Since you have so much influence, surely you must have seen the leader?"

Regardless, he didn't have time to contemplate this.

In order to live, he must follow the path that this demon had pointed out to him.

"I have been granted an audience."

"What is your leader's name?"

Huang shut his trap.

That was the deepest secret within the organization.

The terror and loyalty that have been engraved upon his soul through the passage of the years overrode the terror before his eyes.

But only for a moment.

"James!?"

Another one of his companions disappeared from this earth.

A destruction so complete that he wasn't even permitted to die as a human being.

This reminded him of the blasphemy that their leader used to execute the damned and sent a similar chill up his spine.

"So that was James Zhu, eh. My apologies to the Interpol agents pursuing him across the globe."

"Wait..."

"Is it your turn now, Douglas Huang?"

"Please wait! ...Our boss's name is Richard Sun!"

"And his public persona?"

"...Sun Gongming."

"Address?"

Hong Kong's upper class residential sector, name of the office building, frequented nightclubs, Huang held nothing back.

"...That is everything I know."

"And my questions come to a close. Thank you very much."

"Then, you believe me?"

"Ah, you are undoubtedly one of No Head Dragon's leader, Richard Sun's confidants."

Brought to the brink of extermination, Huang's entire body seemed to sag as his expression sang of his deliverance.

This recently revived hope,

"Gregori!"

Was swiftly crushed with the annihilation of his last remaining comrade.

"...Why!? We took no lives. We didn't even kill anyone!"

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"...We didn't even kill anyone!"

A rather logical defense sprouted through the other side of the phone.

But that was merely the result.

They conspired to commit mass murder, but their plans were derailed by Yanagi, Sanada, and Fujibayashi.

Yet Tatsuya didn't point this out.

"And why does that concern me?"

"What...?"

"How many you have slain or let live means nothing to me!"

Tatsuya had reached the end of his tether in playing out this lifeless performance, so he was no longer disguising his voice.

He had already obtained all the intel he wanted, so there was no need to play out this farce any longer.

"You dared to touch that which cannot be touched.

You dared to sully my scales.

For that alone you all deserve to perish!"

"...You demon!"

"You are the ones to thank for unshackling the demon, Douglas Huang. Consciousness may be the force that propels strength, but emotions take that strength one step further."

Next to the speaker, Tatsuya lightly laughed at himself.

His laughter mixed with the evening wind and accompanied the cold words of damnation that devoured all hope.

"You have touched upon my last remaining emotion and thanks to you, I finally unleashed the 'Power of the Demon'."

"You say the Power of the Demon...? This magic, it cannot be, Demon Right!?"

That statement became Huang's last words.

Huang's voice cut off from there.

The entity that made up Douglas Huang was utterly extinguished from this world.

Chapter 13

The last day of the Nine Schools Competition dawned.

The only event slated for today was Monolith Code. The first match for the elimination round would begin at 9 AM, and the second match held at 10 AM. At 1 PM, the consolation match for Third Place would be held, followed by the final match at 2 PM.

The awards and closing ceremonies would begin at 3:30 PM, with the Nine Schools Competition officially coming to a close at 5 PM.

The competition officially ended at that time because there was still a banquet to be held at 7 PM.

Differing from the meet and greet before the opening ceremony, the banquet after the closing ceremony was the real opportunity for the schools to mingle and interact with one another.

Also, this banquet annually saw the birth of several couples in long distance relationships.

This was not only a chance for high school students to meet one another, but also an excellent opportunity to interact with famous figures in the magical community. Year 3 students especially took care to take advantage of these two areas as much as possible.

Yet, for the four schools that advanced to the elimination round, those details could wait until after the event.

None of the schools were in any hurry.

Everything that could be done had been done, so both the players and the auxiliaries were calmly waiting for the beginning of the competition.

First High's pavilion was no exception. Centered around Katsuto, who was calmly sitting there with his eyes closed, there were plenty of anxious individuals or those struggling to contain their excitement as players and members all waited for the summons to the first match.

There were the three players, Juumonji Katsuto, Tatsumi Koutarou, and Hattori Gyoubu along with the three technicians that accompanied them. Isori was also among their number.

Off to the side, the brass could be seen centered around the Student Council members like Mayumi, Mari, Suzune, and Azusa.

Kanon headed the Year 2 and 3 players.

Those that were unable to enter the pavilion waited eagerly in the supporting stands for the players to appear.

Nonetheless, regardless of where one cast their eyes, Tatsuya's figure remained elusive.

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"Is it OK if you don't go to support them?"

"......There's still some time left."

Hearing Fujibayashi's question, Tatsuya gulped down his food and replied.

Based on his instructions last night, Tatsuya reported to Kazama's room after breakfast.

However, the owner of the room had disappeared for some secret rendezvous in the morning. While he was waiting, he sat down and accepted Fujibayashi's invitation to a second breakfast. —He was a developing teenager with a ravenous appetite, so sandwiches with a few sweets were nothing for him.

Within the boundaries of decorum, they chatted as they gathered up the plates. At this time, Kazama returned with Sanada and Yanagi in tow. He returned a vague salute to Tatsuya and Fujibayashi, who both stood and saluted him, before waving them to take a seat. Kazama sat directly across from Tatsuya, Yanagi took a seat next to Fujibayashi, and Sanada grabbed a chair next to Tatsuya. (Tatsuya already heard from Fujibayashi that Yamanaka had already returned to Kasumigaura Base — which had already been upgraded from station to base.)

"Good work last night."

After briefly exchanging greetings, Kazama spoke up.

"No, I should be the one thanking you. I apologize for troubling everyone with personal business."

"This is hardly a personal matter for you. Speaking of which, I was also attacked."

"Also, we obtained critical combat data last night. Beeline range roughly 1200 meters. It is very rare to obtain data for long range magic that successfully sniped human targets at this range. For someone like you who excels in extreme long distance precision attacks and OTH (over the horizon) sniping, this distance may not be satisfactory, but I am very pleased with this observation data."

Yanagi and Sanada both reassured Tatsuya when he stood up and bowed.

"Just so. Also, Internal Affairs and Public Safety were both exceptionally pleased with our gift last night. You successfully completed your mission, so don't worry if it was a little personal."

Accepting Tatsuya's salute, Kazama left it at that.

"......However, is the intel surrounding the leader of a criminal organization that valuable?"

Last night, he intentionally reached out to the criminals with a mocking tone despite the fact that this behavior ran against his personality because those were Kazama's orders.

"That's because this is no simple criminal organization."

"............"

"Tatsuya-kun, how familiar are you with the 'Sorcery Booster'?"

At Tatsuya's wordless interrogation, Sanada opened his mouth.

"I've heard the name before. That is a breakthrough Magic Amplifier introduced by criminal organizations within the past few years. To be honest, I find this highly suspicious......"

"Magic Amplifiers do exist. On some level, referring to it as a 'breakthrough Magic Amplifier' is absolutely correct."

"Speaking of which, is it possible to amplify magic to that degree?"

While he didn't believe that this was the kind of situation where Sanada would discuss groundless rumors at length, Tatsuya still found it difficult to dispel the "dubious" first impression.

Even though Magic Sequences were a "signal" that included processes from the Magician that were ultimately sent to the target Eidos, they were not wholly unrelated to the amplification process.

However, the processes from the Magic Sequences shifted in the information dimension, so the signals from the Magic Sequence did not progress from the Magician to the Eidos directly.

The first question of the day...... originated from exactly where was the Magic Sequence constructed by Magicians amplified.

"This is not amplification in the classical sense. Let me think...... Allow me to put it this way, this doesn't merely provide a blueprint for the Magic Sequence, it's a CAD that possesses a self-restoring blueprint built into the Magic Sequence that assists in the construction process. Through this, Magic Sequences of this scale are rendered possible by surpassing a Magician's original capacity."

"That...... Rather than calling it a 'Booster', the term 'Memory Capacitor' may be closer to the mark."

"Possibly."

Maybe Tatsuya's comment hit the nail on the head, because Sanada burst into a chain of laughter.

"......It's hardly surprising if the terminology doesn't match its purpose. No Head Dragon is one of the primary distributors of this Booster. This tool runs into a little trouble when procuring raw materials, since legal corporations are unable to manufacture these things. Even nations run a significant risk if this is brought to light. In reality, No Head Dragon monopolized the supply for Sorcery Boosters."

"Then, do we need the leader's intel to procure Sorcery Boosters?"

"Negative. We need the target's intel in order to permanently halt the production and distribution of these Boosters.

This is not something that should exist in the world in the first place. I would never use it, nor do I want anyone in the force to do so.
—Tatsuya-kun knows how the Induction Stone in the center of the CAD is produced, right?"

Induction Stones refer to the component that transforms psion waves into electric signals and vice versa. Tatsuya was bewildered at the abrupt change in conversation and nodded in assent.

"Induction Stones are created from a crystallization of neurons chemically synthesized from the molecular level. Since the differences in structure may impact the conversion ratio, the emphasis is placed on the structural composition rather than the physical characteristics of the neurons. That being said, currently there are no reports of successful developments of Induction Stones without relying on artificial materials."

Hearing Tatsuya's response, Sanada nodded in satisfaction.

"You are correct. However, the Booster's core contains an Induction Stone that is not forged from artificial neurons."

"Then what is it......"

"A human brain."

Sanada's answer silenced Tatsuya.

"To be precise, it's a Magician's brain."

"......But when they used neurons from animals, the remaining psion particles in the brain should interfere with the user's ability to achieve induction. This should also be true when using a human brain."

The reason Tatsuya was struck speechless did not arise from the unethical nature of their discussion.

He was well versed in the cases at the dawn of CAD development where they conducted experiments on animals and humans.

The results from these experiments that blatantly ignored ethics, conscience, and beliefs established the technique for chemical synthesis of Induction Stones.

Nevertheless, No Head Dragon managed to overturn these conventional beliefs.

Tatsuya was astounded by this turn about.

"They are completely different from normal Induction Stones. Each Booster is specifically designed to use one type of magic, so the type of magic differs based on the specs for the Boosters. Still, scaling on some level could be achieved. Based on our estimates, remnant thoughts left over from the production process may play a role in altering the type of magic. By creating the same powerful emotions during the production process, similar Boosters can be created."

"......Such as introducing massive pain to the brain to provoke overwhelming fear, am I correct?"

"Most likely."

"......It's the same concept as curses."

"I agree. Boosters may have been born from the same basis as curses. Even though we use magic as weapons and added Magicians to the military hierarchy, our goal was to create a prototype unit rather than using Magicians as mere parts. I am a Magician as well. Along with Captain Sanada, Captain Yanagi, Lieutenant Fujibayashi, all units and personnel in the unit are basically Magicians. Generators are still tolerable, but creating and disseminating things like Boosters is absolutely unforgivable."

"Setting aside the emotional perspective of the problem, capacity enhancers like Sorcery Boosters also pose a threat to the military. Since the North American Intelligence Agency (NAIA) shares this view, they have already reached out to Internal Affairs. Mibu extends his thanks, Tatsuya."

Kazama supplied this final piece as the conversation drew to an end.

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Once Tatsuya arrived at the spectator stands and began looking for an empty spot, a small block of ice came hurtling towards him from the front.

He frantically caught the ball of ice and, by the time he lowered his hand, his eyes caught Miyuki looking back at him.

Abandoning all pretense of not noticing her, Tatsuya obediently advanced to the front row where an empty seat waited for him.

"......Such a violent greeting."

"That's because Onii-sama pretended not to notice us!"

......Tatsuya had no rejoinder for that.

Well, the real reason he pretended not to notice was to avoid doing anything else that would draw attention to himself from the audience, but he clearly understood that this excuse would not fly with his sister.

Still, that reason was largely for Miyuki's benefit. Given the expressions on the faces of their peers and upperclassmen, this was most definitely not the case for them. —Lukewarm expressions of pity would please no one.

"Oh, the players are coming."

"You were just in time, Tatsuya-kun."

The one who answered Tatsuya wasn't Miyuki, but Honoka who was sitting on her other side. Miyuki was busy putting on a smiling face to dispel the lukewarm gazes sent their way. In order to make up for the lost opportunity to speak, she edged closer to Tatsuya as she sat down.

The first match of the elimination round pitted First High against Ninth, coincidentally the same line up as the Newcomers Division.

Ninth High likely hoped to avenge their defeat here. All three players displayed high morale.

In comparison, First High's three players presented three different images.

Katsuto remained impassive, Tatsumi's thoughts remained a mystery, while Hattori wore a serious expression as he eyed the enemy team with a challenging glint in his eyes.

Their completely normal appearance brought on an aura of reassurance.

"Compared to us, they certainly give off a relaxing feel...... Such is how people are on another level."

"Nonsense! I never doubted that Onii-sama would triumph!"

"Your group performed admirably, Tatsuya-kun! You were all courageous and honorable in the extreme."

Tatsuya didn't mean anything in particular with his comment, but he was a little lost when they provoked immediate words of reassurance or encouragement.

Still, they kept their voices down since the match was about to begin in order to avoid attention, but that didn't guarantee they would be successful all the time. That's why they say watch what you say (?). Mindful of this, Tatsuya chased away these distractions from his mind and concentrated all his attention on the match.

—Shizuku staring at him with a displeased expression may also have played a small part in that.

—Unrelated to this drama, the match began.

The match took place in a Karst-like "Boulder" setting.

With the starting buzzer, Hattori emerged out of First High's territory.

With a liberal mix of Leaping Magic, he stormed towards the enemy territory with a speed that simply couldn't be done with pure legwork.

Ninth High's response was extremely sluggish.

Displaying high morale counted in their favor, but First High seized the initiative.

Seeing their blazing fervor, Ninth High probably planned to launch a preemptive strike.

However, with their opponent's unexpected charge, their delayed response was filled with doubt.

They debated over whether they should immediately take out the attacker and capture a numerical advantage.

Or, should they leave the retaliation to the defender and proceed towards the enemy territory as planned.

First High's objective was precisely to sow the seeds of doubt in their minds.

Hattori stopped halfway between the two areas and began to release magic towards the three players from Ninth High who were still dragging their feet.

With the rising air currents, white mist formed over the heads of the players from Ninth High. The mist swiftly coalesced and fell downwards as if unable to support its own weight.

Hail formed from dry ice crashed downwards.

Convergence·Release·Move Compound Systematic Magic "Dry Blizzard".

This was the basic form of the spell that Mayumi used during Speed Shooting.

This magic took the heat energy (latent heat) released when lowering carbon dioxide to solidifying temperature and turning solid and transformed it into the kinetic energy for dry ice pellets, so the higher the temperature, the greater the velocity. Released from the outer periphery of the defensive perimeter — boulders provided no cover from dry ice pellets released directly overhead. Since they were all wearing protective helmets, ice blocks the size of the fingertip wouldn't cause any major injury, but multiple hits could lead to a mild concussion.

At the current rate, their inability to retaliate would lead to their demise, so one of the players from Ninth High spread out a magical protective barrier over their heads to protect them — an imaginary obstruction that would reduce the speed of the descending particles to zero.

The shield formed by that player would only reduce the speed to zero once. After the particle came to a stop in the air, gravity would once again pull it down to the earth. The dry ice Hattori created was formed from freezing the surrounding air and causing the moisture to solidify so they would fall to the earth like a drizzle on top of the players from Ninth High and the surrounding boulders. Once the misty air absorbed the released carbon dioxide, this formed a continuous layer of fog.

Due to the boulders surrounding the immediate area, it was very difficult for the fog to migrate anywhere other than Ninth High's position.

Even though the fog wasn't thick enough to hinder visibility, having the entire body suffused in wet, cold air was certainly going to be unpleasant. Another player started venting the air current in hopes of dispelling the side effects of Dry Blizzard.

However, Hattori had already activated his next magic.

His spell used the friction caused by slightly vibrating the dust particles in the ground to alter the electrical current in the dirt, then amplifying and releasing the charge.

While one of the Year 1 students from Eighth High also attempted the same type of magic in a similar setting, the sheer strength and practiced motion of the same spell were like night and day.

A crescent shape seeming to trace Ninth High's magic defensive perimeter began to glow in an area that was roughly five meters wide.

Countless flashes of light intermixed with one another like a herd of small snakes swarming forward.

Regardless of whether it was the ground mixed with sand, the loosely growing grass, or even the rolling stones, anything covered by the fog of carbon dioxide became charged by the moisture.

The electric snake outside the magic defense barrier ignored the magic and dove straight for the player from Ninth High.

Compound Magic, "Slithering Thunders".

Compound Magics are not simply magics that have multiple spells woven into one Magic Sequence. Rather, it is a combination of the effects of multiple magics where the aggregate whole provides a greater effect than the sum of its parts.

Hattori was not renowned for using exceptionally strong magic, unparalleled processing speed, or multi-casting. Instead, Hattori was an incredibly versatile Magician who could stably choose from an assortment of magic to fit any scenario; herein lay his advantage.

With so many different assortments at his disposal, Compound Magic greatly benefited from his versatility, and was a perfect method to bring out Hattori's potential.

One of the three players from Ninth High leaped into the air to escape the electric current.

Unfortunately, the players responsible for the defensive barrier overhead and venting the air currents were half a beat slow in switching to Leaping Magic.

The electric light ensnared the players' feet.

Even though the protective boots were insulated, the protective vest itself was not. (High insulation would hamper air permeability.)

The fog that was inundated with carbon dioxide clung to the players' bodies.

The player who was wielding wind magic was able to quickly switch targets and sought to use the wind to blow away the moisture in order to lessen the blow. Unfortunately, his compatriot who was holding the magic defense barrier wasn't so fortunate and suffered a direct hit from "Slithering Thunders".

Next to the player who collapsed on the ground, his companion fell to one knee.

He gave up on his immobile leg and maintained this position to wield his CAD.

Someone cried out in pain in the air.

The player who had leaped into the air to avoid the electric attack was struck by an invisible hammer and crashed back to earth.

Tatsumi Koutarou, who used Single Systematic Magic but specialized in interference strength, had cast Speed-Type Magic on him. By instantly applying downwards gravitational pull, the opposing player immediately hit the deck.

At the same time, the player from Ninth High activated Convergence Magic.

It was unknown whether he was unaware of his companion's predicament or whether this was as expected of a team that advanced to the elimination round.

Hattori was the target of the compressed air pellets being fired. Besides special circumstances like being underwater or in a vacuum, air existed in almost every scenario, hence its combat application was a popular choice.

Thanks to the rules limiting attack options and destructive power, Monolith Code largely favored compressed air pellet attacks.

The highly compressed air pellets that formed outside of Hattori's defensive perimeter — shattered into pieces against an invisible wall that materialized before Hattori.

Hattori was not the cause of that.

That was Katsuto casting "Reflector" from 400 meters behind him.

This Area of Effect Magic ignored solids, fluids, and gases and created a force field that reversed motion vectors.

Compared to normal Targeting Magic, Area of Effect Magic was even more challenging.

The difficulty comes from the blurring of the lines.

The difference between changing a target's properties and the properties of an empty space was practically nonexistent. The difficulty arises when trying to differentiate between which areas needed to be rewritten and which areas cannot be.

For targets such as walls, ceilings and railings, the partitions can be seen easily. However, trying to create a distinction in the outdoors for a special location was many times more difficult.

Still, if this was offensive magic, the difficulty can be lessened by setting targeting parameters within the Activation Sequence.

On the other hand, defensive magic was restricted in that it had to fulfill all the conditions without knowing the nature and distance of enemy attacks as well as having limits on area, volume, and shape.

Such as a shield to protect yourself.

Or a wall to defend your teammates.

By setting the Magician as the origin, a respective distance could be plotted to the target.

Generally, this was as far as one got.

However, Katsuto set Hattori as the protective target in an outdoor setting with no reference points without the need for supporting tools. He had created a perfect "Reflector" from 400 meters out.

This was an outstanding spatial awareness.

The Juumonji Family took the next step to hone their natural talents in spatial awareness. Their ability to wield multiple types of Area of Effect defensive magic has earned them the title "Stonewall".

Hattori activated his next magic.

Against the attacks from Ninth High, he didn't even bother to defend himself.

The construction of this Magic Sequence was wholly dependent on Katsuto's unquestionable ability to defend him from enemy attack.

The dust on the ground took to the skies.

Sand was sent spiraling into the air by the wind.

Ten meters ahead of Hattori, the dust storm grew in strength and speed as it advanced upon the opposing player before falling upon him in fury.

Speed·Convergence Compound Magic, "Linear Sandstorm".

With the first dust particle raised into the air as the center, this Area of Effect offensive magic constructed layers and layers of complexity around the center as it spun around.

The converging sandstorm knocked the player from Ninth High to the floor.

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"That match was at an incredibly high level......"

Tatsuya used the ending signal as a BGM and said in exhilaration.

The match itself was a completely one-sided affair.

His comment on level was in regards to the magic used as well as its application.

Especially Hattori, whose skillful use of magic techniques was enough to prompt him to hope "Miyuki learns a thing or two from him". (He didn't say "he could learn something", because he had arrived at the conclusion that he was incapable of imitating that level of skill.)

Tatsuya never overly underestimated Hattori. Even though he had defeated the man in a match, that was only because he seized the initiative and got under his guard. Tatsuya recognized this from a completely objective perspective.

Compared to Magic Power, his magic application was even more skillful. Tatsuya already had an inkling of this given his many opportunities to see Hattori in action.

Still, that earlier display of might honestly exceeded his expectations.

(I am still a long ways off from getting an accurate read on others......)

"Next match will be the finals."

Utterly ignorant of Tatsuya's mental struggles, Honoka innocently opened up.

For her, it was only natural that the Student Council Vice President boasted great skill.

The word "natural" shook Tatsuya out of his reverie.

Isn't it only natural to not read others accurately? He was only a high school student after all.

Tatsuya's mental status was still stuck in his persona as the Special Lieutenant from the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion from last night and it was only now that he reverted to the high school student Shiba Tatsuya.

"The finals begin at 1 PM, and it's a little early for lunch......"

"Will you take us for a few cold drinks, Onii-sama?"

"Agreed. Ice cream would be even better."

Hearing Miyuki's suggestion, Shizuku swiftly assented.

He had no duties as a technician today.

Nor did he have to worry about any hindrances from any criminal organizations.

Occasionally, it wasn't bad to indulge in the life of a high school student — Tatsuya thought and made his decision.

"I saw a concession truck earlier, would that be acceptable?"

"Yes, let's go!"

Tatsuya tossed aside any thoughts regarding how others would see one young man leading three beautiful young ladies and led Miyuki and company to the ice cream concession area.

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The finals for Monolith Code was set for the "Valley".

In order to pass along the board's decision, Mayumi visited the players' resting area.

Surely a simple matter like passing the word along didn't necessitate the Student Council President's appearance.

In reality, if that's all there was, Mayumi probably wouldn't show up in person.

"Juumonji-kun, are you here?"

After speaking into the intercom near the entrance, someone immediately replied with "Right away".

Shortly afterwards, Katsuto appeared wearing a vest and protective leggings as he used his head to raise the cloth hanging over the doorway.

"Apologies for my wardrobe."

"Don't worry. It's not like you're indecent."

Katsuto was covered in the scent of alcohol.

And not because he was drinking.

That must be because his deodorant contained alcoholic content. He delayed coming out immediately probably to spare Mayumi the scent of sweat clinging to him. While he wasn't a feminist of any sort, he was undeniably a gentleman. It was just like Katsuto to notice all the small details without mentioning anything aloud, Mayumi thought.

"So, what is it?"

Mayumi had set aside her official business and was busy ruminating over nonsensical things when Katsuto's question shook her back to reality.

"The setting for the finals has been decided. Can you come with me for a minute?"

If this was all there was, one sentence would have been sufficient.

Yet, Katsuto didn't ask "why" or "what for" as he quietly followed behind Mayumi.

Mayumi led Katsuto to the same room where she spoke with Tatsuya three days ago.

Just like three days ago, she erected a soundproof barrier and started speaking quietly with the already seated Katsuto.

"Father sent a coded missive. Apparently, this is the directive from the clan meeting."

"Ho?"

"Looks like Juumonji-kun hasn't received it yet, right?"

"Correct."

Though Katsuto's response was unexpected, but coded missives from the clan meetings generally took a considerable time alone to decipher. The Juumonji Family must have felt that even though this was the break time between matches, the captain being absent for a long period of time would rouse suspicion. That was Mayumi's take on the situation.

Mayumi and Katsuto were on a different footing than the other members on the team.

This difference was not because they were the Student Council President and Club Group Leader, but because their social standing was inherently different.

Mayumi was a direct descendant of one of the current Ten Master Clans.

Katsuto's standing was even more unique.

Not only was he a direct descendant, but, unlike Mayumi, he was also the heir of the Juumonji Family.

Among all the students in the Nine Schools Competition, only Masaki could stand on equal footing with Katsuto.

"Two days ago, didn't Tatsuya-kun defeat Ichijou-kun?"

"......So what?"

Katsuto's question wasn't "why are you bringing this up", but "so what".

Nay, in reality his question was a mere formality.

"The Ten Master Clans stand at the pinnacle of this country's Magicians.

Magicians who bear the name of the Ten Master Clans must be the strongest Magicians in the country."

Mayumi's voice contained an ironic tone. The ideas she was expressing were not her own, but came from her father, and by extension were the "doctrine" handed down by the clan meeting. She probably believed otherwise, but right now the clan meeting's "doctrine" overrode her own personal philosophy.

"Even a high school game cannot allow people to suspect that the power of the Ten Master Clans is anything but absolute. That's probably what they're driving at."

"But, that match can't simply be dismissed as fun and games."

The rebuttal was only words, but the tone was relaxed and light.

"In other words, the clan meeting asked for a match to aggrandize the might of the Ten Master Clans, did I get that right?"

"Yes...... I just don't want to force such a ridiculous burden onto Juumonji-kun."

"Nay...... Rather, this is a duty that naturally falls to the next heir of the Juumonji Family like myself. Sorry for causing you so much worry."

"That's nothing really......"

Likely due to her terrible mood, Mayumi rarely cut loose with a barrage of sincere grousing.

"Seriously, this is ludicrous...... Even if Tatsuya-kun was a side branch, so long as he had the bloodline of the Ten Master Clans, then he wouldn't be embroiled in this third-rate farce......"

Katsuto didn't comment on Mayumi's complaints.

"Just leave it to me."

He didn't show any outward sign of emotion as he calmly replied.

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First High was against Third High for the Monolith Code finals.

The back stories behind this match up were legion, to the point that it could even be called a "fateful showdown", but the finals were even more one-sided than the semifinals.

Maybe it was just karma.

Everything Masaki did to Eighth High in the Newcomers Division was returned with interest.

The setting for this match was the "Valley".

From the get go, anything that utilized the terrain, such as flying icicles, falling rocks, or even boiling spray, was sent hurtling towards Katsuto in an endless stream.

However, Katsuto's barrier reflected all the attacks.

Every motion vector was reversed.

Electromagnetic waves (including light) were refracted.

Molecular oscillation was adjusted back to a stable value.

Psion intrusion was denied.

All attacks were obstructed by the multi-layered defensive barrier.

Nothing could stop Katsuto's advance.

Multi-layer Move-Type Defensive Magic "Phalanx".

This magic, while putting the real value of the Magicians from the Juumonji Family on full display, was not simply a sustained magic barrier, but a multi-layered barrier that continuously refreshed itself.

This was just like a dense formation of heavy infantry that marched as one to increase the group's defensive power and then translate that power into offense.

Once the foremost rank of soldiers fell, the next rank would immediately fill in and maintain the defense. This magic inherited the name from that ancient formation and displayed defensive prowess and suffocating pressure worthy of its lofty name.

Katsuto was situated in a narrow arena as he steadily advanced step by step towards the enemy's position.

The players from Third High couldn't ignore or avoid him.

If they let up on the attack, surely they would be instantly engulfed by a decisive attack......

Each step increased the pressure a little more, forcing them to cling onto that belief and urged them to press the assault.

Though they were unable to penetrate that wall, they should still have exhausted the defender somewhat. Yet compared to the three panting players from Third High, there was nary a sign of fatigue on Katsuto's part.

When there were only a paltry 10 meters or so between the two sides, Katsuto finally came to a stop.

He stopped his slow, plodding advance, and bunched all his energy together to kick off the floor.

A boulder-like body flew through the air while parallel to the ground.

He cast Speed·Move Magic on himself, then adopted a shoulder tackle position as he crashed into the enemy players. His impermeable barrier remained active the entire time.

One of the players from Third High was sent flying by the sudden impact against this indomitable barrier.

Katsuto's gigantic frame didn't stop for even a second before changing course for the next enemy.

Before this insurmountable barrier and the overwhelming interference strength attached to it, magical defenses and momentum shifting became meaningless.

The players from Third High were helplessly smashed aside as the Monolith Code finals drew to a close.

This complete victory served to crown First High's overall victory with a fresh crown of laurels.

Seeing Katsuto raise his hands in response to the applause, Tatsuya and his friends also applauded, but were all unable to speak.

Dominant was no longer sufficient to describe what just happened.

Besides terrifying and tremendous, no other words would suffice.

The tactic itself was simple.

Simple enough to describe this as a trial by brute force.

Yet that magic — was not "simply" brute force.

He continuously cycled between the Four Great Systems and Eight Major Types at irregular intervals while creating new barriers — an awe-inspiring "difficult" brute force.

"Amazing...... So that's the Juumonji Family's 'Phalanx', eh......"

Besides ordinary expressions, even Miyuki had nothing left to say.

This showed that she was shocked by what just happened.

He could understand that sentiment.

But disagreed with her words.

"No...... I doubt that's the original 'Phalanx'."

Multi-layered Defensive Magic "Phalanx" was practically another name for the Juumonji Family.

However, most people never got a chance to catch a glimpse of this magic.

That's because, in general, there was no need to create a barrier that defended against all major systems and types of magic.

Under the condition that multiple Magicians were attacking the same target, more attacks would lead to an increase in the variability in the types of attack magic and increase the risk for magic interference. All of this was well known.

It wasn't that Tatsuya had beheld this magic before.

In the earlier match, the multi-layered barrier that Katsuto cast did include magic from all systems and types of magic.

That truly was "Phalanx".

Still, Tatsuya wasn't able to accept this conjecture so easily.

"That final attack...... It's likely that was the original usage of 'Phalanx'."

Rather than calling this a leap of logic, this was closer to his intuition.

Even if he believed that the real Phalanx was reserved for something far more terrifying.

"If Onii-sama says so, then that must be how it is. In that case...... Juumonji-senpai certainly has an intimidating power."

Tatsuya agreed.

While he was clapping in appreciation, Tatsuya suddenly felt Katsuto's eyes sweep over him.

Katsuto raised his fist to the heavens and basked in his victory.

Tatsuya saw that, for an instant, Katsuto's gaze matched his own and, in that instant, he revealed a wide smile.

I am stronger than you — that was the declaration Tatsuya read from Katsuto's eyes.

The grace of kings that forced one to their knees without resorting to brute force.

But at the end of the day, that was only political sophistry.

Before battle was even joined, the awesome might of absolute terror that forced their opponents to abandon their swords and any hope of resistance was the true mark of kings.

Katsuto, he who returned the cheers of victory, understood the value of that power and how to utilize it. He carried the majesty of a monarch.

Chapter 14

In stark contrast to the atmosphere two weeks ago (or to be exact 12 days ago), the hall was filled with a peaceful air.

While it's easy to proclaim a neutral spirit, it's not so easy in practice, and it would be a lie to say that there were none with the thoughts of victory or defeat occupying their mind.

But now, the fierce competitions of the past 10 days were over.

The dress code for the festivities was their usual uniforms.

Once again forced to take up his ill-fitting blazer, he thought, "At least if it comes to dancing will this be better?" A thought which had ended up similar to that of digging his own grave.

"Popular, huh?"

Coming up to him with an evil smile was Mari, who had been officially discharged one day earlier.

"Thank you. To tell the truth, I'd far rather be taking it easy."

As if saying it couldn't be helped, Tatsuya glanced over at his sister, who was surrounded by a crowd two, three layers deep.

Fellow students, event organizers, base officials who provided the venue, the executives of companies that sponsored the tournament.

Those were inevitable, but with the inclusion of media professionals (production companies, commercial companies, talent agencies) also dressed up as officials, it made one feel like asking what's the big idea? to the organizers of the party.

Truthfully he would have liked nothing more than to forcefully put those noisy and rude people away, but with a shrewd (frosty?) look, Suzune had warned him against such an approach, so he kept a low profile for the moment.

"I'm not talking about your sister."

Hearing Tatsuya's natural reply, Mari chuckled sadly.

"The one I'm referring to is you, Tatsuya-kun."

From Mari's point of view, Tatsuya made a tired face.

Although nowhere comparable to the crowd around Miyuki, Tatsuya had been constantly sought out from the start as well.

Most of them were unacquainted adults.

It wasn't that he had never seen them before.

Due to his work at his father's company, despite his age, he knew the faces of businessmen quite well.

Still, it was only on the level of a "high school student".

As a resident of the laboratory, he was not necessarily involved on the business side, but compared to general employees in the same industry he had far more contact than "just a little".

Of those who had come to talk with him, he knew more than half of them by sight.

"Wasn't that the president of Rozen's Japanese branch? This would be the first time he talked to a high school student huh?"

"I wouldn't know. It's also my first time here at the Nine Schools Competition after all."

"Fair enough."

As Mari gave her wicked grin, Tatsuya felt a twinge of annoyance. —In the threshold of around 80% or so.

"......Well, there's no helping it. I don't know why you're so reluctant, but just as you can tell a fake gem simply by looking at it, when you see the real deal you can immediately tell that too."

"......"

"Don't put on such a dissatisfied face. The dance is about to start soon. From there on, it's students only. Just be patient a little longer."

Tapping his shoulder, Mari walked over to the drinks table.

She seemed to be in a good mood for some reason.

Far more impressive was that despite pushing herself as always even after being wounded, she now seemed to have made a full recovery.

(So a lover has that kind of effect huh......)

Although he himself had no experience, Tatsuya couldn't help but say so to himself.

Around a minute after that, she left the party with Naotsugu, and Tatsuya uncharacteristically was left to ponder on such things.

Doing so, he felt like sighing.

To be certain, very soon, the time allocated for adults to work their tricks on the innocent would be over.

Yet even so his mind was heavy. The reason was the dance.

Truth be told, students like Tatsuya were the exception.

As the bigwigs left, the venue seemed to relax, and a carefree atmosphere filled the air.

The soft sound of wind and string instruments began to flow.

At the enthusiasm of the organizers who had prepared an evening of live music, the young men immediately responded.

Making full use of the trials they had gone through, they took the hands of the girls they had grown closer to, and proceeded to the center of the hall.

It was unfortunate they weren't in dresses, but such a fact was utterly irrelevant to them.

The common dress code for the girls of the nine schools was a silk organdy inner gown (worn under their jacket), which fluttered gently as they moved.

As expected, Miyuki was being swarmed by boys both from school and from without.

It seemed no one was capable of staying away.

Because she was surrounded up until the last minute, she probably hadn't been able to get a single word out.

Unlike Tatsuya, Miyuki had been firmly taught manners on how to act at a ball ("it's not a 'dance party'!"), so provided proper procedure was observed she was unlikely to refuse a dance partner (naturally, that didn't mean she'd dance with just anyone), but rather it seemed the boys were being embarrassed on their own.

From within that crowd, Tatsuya's familiar face became visible to Miyuki.

Or rather than saying familiar face, it might be better to say companion.

Leaving the wall, Tatsuya advanced to the edge of the crowd.

He was by no means slender, but he skillfully slipped through the press to stand by Miyuki's side.

"It's been two days huh, Ichijou Masaki."

"Ah, Shiba Tatsuya."

The two exchanged easygoing(?) greetings.

They didn't consider themselves friends, yet at the same time, they didn't think that they needed stiff formalities either.

"Is your ear alright?"

"It's fine, it's nothing worth being concerned about."

"Is that so."

At Tatsuya's (intended) politeness, Masaki returned a quip which could hardly be called amiable. Well, for him who suffered defeat in what by all means should have been a victory, he couldn't really be expected to happily accept concern from the winners. Although his tone was ambiguous, it certainly held a dismissive air.

Becoming aware of Miyuki's cold gaze turned in his direction, Masaki's heart sank in dismay.

"Eh, ah...... Ah? Shiba!?"

He suddenly called out Tatsuya's last name, causing Tatsuya to make a "is this guy alright?" face.

"Are you, her brother!?"

Masaki's words caused Tatsuya no end of weariness.

"......Are you telling me you only realized just now? Seriously?"

His amazed face implying "I think I understand?", Masaki stood frozen.

A modest laugh was heard.

Covering her mouth, Miyuki turned away.

"......Ichijou-san, you weren't able to tell Onii-sama and I were siblings?"

Miyuki's voice as she spoke to Masaki, as she suppressed her laughter, seemed somehow happy.

"Eh, no, that um...... yes."

As Masaki gave up trying to find an excuse, Miyuki looked on with a smile.

He wasn't quite sure what had caught her interest, but it seemed to him that Ichijou had suddenly become sensible in Miyuki's eyes.

That being said, it only meant he was now considered on the level to be a possible dance candidate.

"You can't just stay standing here forever, so Miyuki, why don't you go dance with Ichijou?"

At Tatsuya's words (or more precisely the "dance with Ichijou" part), Masaki looked up sharply.

His eyes shone in anticipation.

After Miyuki's giggling bout subsided, she tilted her head in Masaki's direction as if asking "what will you do?".

"Could you please......accompany me for two songs?"

With a reverential voice, Masaki bowed deferentially to Miyuki.

"Please take care of me as well."

Returning the bow, Miyuki took Masaki's proffered hand.

As he took his position, Masaki's face was glowing as he nodded to Tatsuya in thanks.

Seeing that, Tatsuya thought "what a mercenary guy".

The romantic comedy(?) Masaki was acting out was no concern to Tatsuya. (As long as Miyuki was "alright" with it.)

That was why he was able to accept it so easily.

When it came to himself however, even in the best of conditions, he was unable to deal with such things.

At this moment, catching a glimpse of his hesitant shifty form, he was acutely aware of his own immaturity.

"Sir, at a time like this, it's best for the man to take the lead."

Honoka alone was too much for him to handle, how could he be blamed for wanting to run away from this whole mess? He wanted to complain to this newcomer. —But that didn't come out.

"Erika......why are you a waitress?"

"But I've been doing this since the beginning."

Tatsuya's complaint was airily brushed aside.

Leo and Mikihiko, as participants, had been invited to the party. Both Erika and Mizuki, perhaps treated as part of the staff, were along as well. But the four of them weren't participating, preferring rather to attend as part-time workers.

Mikihiko was as per his wishes(?) working in the kitchen, but Erika was moving up and down the hall dressed in a fluttering waitress costume.

"......Then I really don't think you should be wasting time in a place like this."

"Giving appropriate advice to our guests is also part of the job description."

Being answered with such a straight face, Tatsuya felt the urge to apply palm to face. Her "work" aside, Tatsuya knew there was another reason for Erika's words.

Honoka was waiting for Tatsuya's invitation.

He knew exactly where she was without needing to be told.

But he had absolutely no idea what to do after that.

After all, he had no experience whatsoever in "inviting" a woman.

"Sir? There really isn't any need to think so hard about all this."

Erika had only been here for her amusement earlier, but gradually a note of amazement crept into her voice.

At this rate though, that amazement would soon turn to irritation.

Thinking that would be a bit, no absolutely unbearable, Tatsuya decided to bite the bullet.

"......Honoka."

"Yes!"

Tatsuya made his preparations.

"......want to dance?"

It took a comparatively long time to get those words out, due to his lack of self-confidence.

"Gladly!"

Yet, Honoka seemed more than happy enough.

After that, Tatsuya was put through his paces with Shizuku, then Eimi, then Mayumi, until finally he slumped against the wall exhausted.

Mayumi was particularly tough.

Her sense of rhythm was quite unique.

Even as a compliment, it couldn't be said that Tatsuya was a terribly good dancer. Since he had never practiced, it was only to be expected. However, he never made a fumble such as stepping on his partner's foot. On the contrary, his steps were impeccable.

During their dance, Shizuku had muttered that he "danced like a dance machine," words which could be taken as a compliment or not either way.

Stringing together observed behavior then reproducing and adding some bits Tatsuya's dancing was, beauty or elegance aside, perfectly and technically accurate.

In a sense however, Mayumi was the exact opposite.

Her execution and steps were completely off.

Rather than tone-deaf however, it was more that she had an ingenious sense, such that despite her movements being subtly off for each sound, her dance still elegantly moved along with the flow of the song.

Because of that, Tatsuya was forced to match both Mayumi and the music, going along with the rhythm of the two and shunting his steps as necessary.

Any normal person would simply try and match their partner and simply hope everything works out one way or another, but since his body didn't know the dance and Tatsuya was simply reproducing the movements in his head, doing something like that was too much.

Yet even after Mayumi left Tatsuya exhausted, going off to look for another partner in high spirits, numerous girls started hanging out before him meaningfully.

He wasn't nearly comparable to Miyuki, who after her dance drew partners like a shining star, but after his success in Monolith Code there were quite a few girls who took an interest in him.

Looking at his drained appearance however, they uniformly gave him sympathetic looks.

Unfortunately for him, although he himself probably didn't realize, just as he was considering going back to his room, with impeccable timing a glass was held out in front of him.

"Tha......thank you."

He suddenly stopped talking, because that person was completely unexpected.

"You seem tired."

"......haah."

"You don't attend events like this often?"

"That's......it's as you say. This may be presumptuous, but Chairman doesn't seem like the type who bothers with this much either."

"I've gotten over it."

The person speaking to him was Katsuto.

He held a non-alcoholic beer in his hands.

Somehow feeling like he had to go along with him, Tatsuya took a drink from the glass he was passed.

But the real deal came after.

"Shiba, come with me for a bit."

Handing his empty glass to a waitress passing by (not Erika), Katsuto turned around.

It meant he wouldn't take no as a response.

Dropping off his empty glass the same way, Tatsuya followed.

In the same garden where they had caught the intruder on the opening night of the tournament, the two of them silently stood there with not another figure in sight.

It wasn't a complete silence.

It seems someone had opened a window.

The sound of music could faintly be heard.

That soft sound lent the atmosphere a serene air.

"Is this alright? I think the celebrations are about to begin soon."

As Katsuto stopped with his back facing him, Tatsuya threw a casual remark.

After the party, a victory celebration in honour of First High was scheduled.

This privilege was given to whichever school won the overall championship.

As both an executive and key player, Katsuto's attendance was of course mandatory.

"Have no concern. We'll be done shortly."

Looking back, Katsuto replied.

Did he mean this wasn't a weighty matter?

If that had been the case, there should have been no need to take him out from the midst of the party.

Or perhaps — he simply meant it wouldn't take long.

......From the looks of things, Katsuto meant the latter.

"Shiba, are you from the Ten Families?"

At that sudden question, Tatsuya was almost put on the defensive.

Not in the sense of being lost for words, but rather preparing for battle.

It was still forbidden for his identity to be leaked out at this stage.

"No. I'm not."

Katsuto's look indicated he would not forgive any dishonesty.

The reason Tatsuya was able to deny Katsuto's assertion however, was because that was true.

He was not one of them. Even though the blood of the Ten ran through his veins, he was never considered one of them.

It was a simple fact.

"—I see."

After watching Tatsuya in anticipation for a while, Katsuto nodded impassively.

Tatsuya did not know whether Katsuto had been convinced with his answer.

"Then, as discussed in a family meeting, here's my advice to you as the vice representative of the Juumonji house.

Shiba, you should join the Ten Families."

"......"

"Hm......how about the Saegusa?"

"......by how about, would you be referring to, how about marrying in? Or the like?"

"Indeed."

Katsuto's magic "Phalanx", as opposed to Tatsuya's original magic "Decomposition", are like natural enemies.

The moment one barrier is pierced through, another takes its place.

It would be endless.

Whilst watching the finals, Tatsuya recalled the unpleasantness of what would be a war of attrition should it come to it......but these words now, utterly unexpected, brought with them a whole new set of horrors.

—This senpai is without a doubt, my natural enemy.

—In many, many ways.

"......in regards to being President Saegusa's partner, was Chairman Juumonji's name not considered as well?"

"That was certainly brought up too."

"......is President Saegusa not your type?"

"No? Well Saegusa does have, cute charms, in her own way."

"......"

Tatsuya could no longer find a reply.

"Ah, Shiba, are you perhaps concerned about her age? Mm......then how about Saegusa's little sisters?

The last time I saw them was two years ago, I'm sure the two of them have grown up to be splendid ladies."

"......Unlike the President and Chairman I'm just a simple high school student, so all these talks of engagement and marriage are a bit much."

"Is that so?"

Katsuto lightly turned his head.

"......However, you should not have too much of a relaxed attitude to all this. Winning against one of the next heads of the Ten Families in a head on confrontation is not something as simple as you'd think."

I don't want to be told that by you! Tatsuya almost retorted.

Tatsuya's confrontation with Masaki had been precipitated by Katsuto in the end after all.

"......I suppose I'll be heading back. Shiba, don't take too long."

Rather than not believing, it was more that he didn't want to believe—

(That guy......don't tell me, that was all "spur of the moment"......?)

Watching his back as he pompously returned to the hall, what a terrifying person Tatsuya thought.

"Onii-sama?"

As Tatsuya stood stunned in the dark night, his sister's voice brought him back.

"What's the matter? This is quite rare, for you to be so out of it to not even notice me approaching."

"Nothing......I just saw something strange......"

"Something strange?"

"Ah, no, don't worry about it."

"?"

Tatsuya's words didn't match the situation, but Miyuki simply tilted her head and didn't pursue any further.

"......The party's about to end."

"The celebration is next huh......"

Feeling somewhat pressed, Tatsuya reflectively frowned.

"I guess there's no way for me to pass on that......"

Miyuki covered her mouth to stifle her laughter.

"You'll just have to accept it. Even if you go back to your room, you'll just be assaulted by Honoka and Erika."

"I get Honoka, but......"

"Erika's been captured by the Chairman."

With a suspicious laugh, Miyuki added that the Chairman was quite something.

"Not to mention......"

Her face was still smiling, but her bright voice was tempered by the seriousness in her eyes as she gazed at Tatsuya.

"I won't let Onii-sama escape."

Tatsuya sighed deeply.

Suddenly, Miyuki tilted her ear.

"......the last song is beginning."

"Is that so?"

Tatsuya had also noticed the song change. He wasn't aware it was the final piece however.

"Onii-sama, won't you join me for the last dance?"

Under a dome of moonlight and starlight, wearing a clear smile even Tatsuya rarely saw, Miyuki bowed gracefully.

That beautiful smile brooked no resistance.

"......Then, shall we head back before the song finishes?"

"No, that would be a waste of time."

Miyuki took Tatsuya's hand.

"We can hear the performance from here just fine."

Taking a deep breath, she huddled closer to him.

"These shoes should be alright even on grass."

Wordlessly, Tatsuya placed a hand around Miyuki's back.

As if entrusting herself to his care, Miyuki placed her hand on Tatsuya's shoulder.

Their bodies touched.

Gently wrapping his hand around her back and deeply embracing her, Tatsuya took a step.

The two figures spun under an endless starlit sky.

As they spun, Tatsuya's face was all Miyuki could see.

Miyuki's face was all Tatsuya could see.

The scenery, the stars, the moon, and the darkness,

In all this wide world which was revolving around them, Tatsuya and Miyuki were the only ones in it.

Afterword

This is a story that is purely fictional.

The stage that the story is set in is very similar to the real world.

Although real or historical figures, organizations, countries, districts as well as other names which have significance or names that make reference to something are used, even if the names are similar, there is still no relevance with the real world whatsoever.

Of course, although such a thing is obvious, unknowingly, I just wanted to put this out there, and this turned into the 4th volume.

Did you, the readers, enjoy it?

When I use names that exist as proper names in reality, a small part of my consciousness hesitates because I feel uneasy about killing off all the enemy characters.

...However, I totally understand that saying this feels like a complete lie, therefore I think I should just stop right here.

Speaking of proper nouns, I'm really inept at creating names for characters from foreign countries.

It is precisely because the story is set in a stage that is really similar to the real world that there are even more troublesome matters to consider.

Western European names still have plenty of reference materials so it's still fine, however what if it's names from Southeast Asia, India, Persia, Africa, or even South America.... What am I to do then?

Currently, it seems like it will not turn into a problem, however one day I will definitely hit a bottleneck.

I wonder if there are any good methods to solve this?

...Alright I will stop all my nonsensical complaints here, next I would like to give my thanks to all those who were involved in the making of this book.

To M-sama, thank you for always giving me excellent and appropriate suggestions. M-sama's suggestions have allowed me to make the siblings image that much more well developed.

Ishida-sama, Stone-sama, the extremely tight publishing schedules also gave you guys lots of trouble.

The pre-orders for this volume were quite substantial as well…… I cannot fully express my gratitude for that.

Suenaga-sama also worried endlessly about the scheduling aspects of this volume.

Once again, to all those who participated in the creation of this book, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude.

Following up from last month, I would like to sincerely thank all those who are reading this afterword right now.

It is all thanks to the support of you readers that the 5th volume can also be successfully published. What is coming out in the upcoming volume 5 will be short stories.

There will be a total of 6 short stories. Amongst them, there are 2 "newly written works". As the other 4 have not been published in commercial magazines yet, it would be more appropriate for all of them to be dubbed as "new works" instead of "newly written works".

Both of the new works will be interludes of the daily episodes of their lives. It can be considered as the peaceful (?) times before the brutal battle that is to come. Please look forward to it!

Well, I sincerely look forward to seeing you all once again in the next volume.

Thank you so much.

(Satou Tsutomu)

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